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The Cyclone Written Into Our Place

The cyclone as trope of apocalypse and place in Queensland literature

Thesis submitted by

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Abstract

Working within a physical landscape that has felt the impact of tropical cyclones and cyclone surges for some 6000 years, including the largest loss of life from a single cyclone in Australian recorded history, Queensland writers have for many years attempted to incorporate both the terror and the sublime of the cyclone into their sense of place. Yet, while studies have been carried out into the significance of cyclonic storms in the literature of other geographic areas, there has been surprisingly little examination until this thesis of the literature of tropical cyclones in Queensland, one of the most cyclone-prone areas in the world.

The tropical cyclone is so integral to North Queensland place and regional life that it has its own season. To successfully inhabit this place, the Queenslander must live with cyclones, incorporating them into the imaginary as well as the literal life: into the country of the mind as well as the physical environment. In this region of seasonal storm, the cyclone is a defining trope of the literary place, and so it is important to examine its significance there. Cyclones as unpredictable wreckers of chaos and destruction regularly remind us of humankind's fragility. Although warnings can be given of their approach, the severity of their impact is in the end due to those natural and invisible elements that cannot be controlled. In an effort to cope with the uncontrollable, humankind seeks meaning in the random meaninglessness of chaos and destruction. For some, cyclones are instruments of divine retribution, whereas for others they are an apocalyptic event that reveals the chance for redemption and renewal, and it is such searches for meaning within chaos that are evident in Queensland literature.

Some writers, such as Queensland Government Meteorologist Clement Wragge, have seen within cyclones the Burkean sublime, the beauty within the terror. For other writers, such as Thea Astley, Vance Palmer, and Patrick White, the cyclone brings spiritual epiphany and personal revelation, while also motivating community strength and compassion as people ignore differences and work together to survive and rebuild. Some writers see the cyclone within themselves as a personal trope, as Susan Hawthorne observes in her poetry. Other writers such as Alexis Wright see a deep and abiding spiritual bond between weather and country, between people and place, which speaks of our future as well as our past. This paper, then, will examine how writers in Queensland and of Queensland have sought for meaning within their literary landscape in order to cope with the chaos of their literal place.

The metaphors and aesthetics of tropical cyclones permeate Queensland literature. The cyclonic storm in Queensland literature reverberates with contexts of theme and setting, of plot and place, of tropes and tropics that encompass the complicated and symbiotic relations between society, nature, landscape, place and space. The cyclonic storm is a literary trope of both personal and collective awareness, of revelation within the stillness and spirituality of the cyclone's eye that enables the individual to emerge from the experience transformed. To transcend the tropical cyclone experience, one needs to be open to the epiphany of the revelation as these violent storms strip away the historic human over-growth, leaving room to re-build and for new life to grow. Cyclones can in this way narrate resilience in the face of natural disaster and allegorize the power of cultural consciousness to strengthen and unify communities and regions. Individuals and communities who have been alienated, weakened, or seemingly destroyed can be drawn closer by cyclonic events, discovering in the aftermath that which had previously been hidden, discovering hope and opportunity where previously were despond and despair. Such events and the stories of them can challenge previous human experience, thereby providing opportunity to move forward and rebuild, opportunity for the emergence of the new.

While this research is concerned with the implications of the literary cyclone in Queensland, this thesis will also recognize that cyclonic storms and the literature of those storms appear in many other regions. The search for meaning within that literature is a search in which many are engaged around the globe, as we broaden our perception through revelations about the relationship between the individual, society, and the tropical biosphere, and between weather, person, and place.

Forward

In the aftermath of surviving Cyclone Yasi, an immense Category 5 system that struck the North Queensland tropical coast in the summer of 2011, during which my wife and I and two dogs huddled in the hallway protected by mattresses, I took down from a shelf my well-thumbed copy of Kerry Emanuel's *Divine Wind: The history and science of hurricanes*, and began to read it once again. As the title suggests, Emanuel examines not just the science of hurricanes but also their significance in history, literature and art, developing an integrated appreciation of cyclonic weather events as part of human culture. As I read, it occurred to me, having so recently endured an encounter with the hurricane's southern hemisphere equivalent, that Emanuel was posing some significant questions about the interaction between environment, place, and imagination, such as in what way does violent, chaotic, destructive, even life-threatening weather become an experience that provides imaginative inspiration? How does personal experience with and in such weather speak of our relationship with place? In using a weather trope such as a cyclone, what might the artist be saying about themselves and their culture? In this thesis, I have endeavoured to propose some answers to those questions.

As a writer in North Queensland, a tropical region prone to cyclones, I was specifically interested in how other writers either living in Queensland or writing about Queensland had responded to these violent weather events. I initially assumed that other researchers must also have been curious about the imaginative response to such a unique feature of the regional environment, yet it became evident very early in my research that no one had yet explored the influence of the cyclone as a trope in the Queensland literary imagination, even though cyclones are the most violent and significant weather system to make regular landfall in the region. This realization only prompted other questions. Was there even a significant body of Queensland literary work that featured cyclones and, if so, what were the significant works within that body? Were there thematic and stylistic connections between these works? What discourse did these works prompt between the reader, cyclones, and Queensland place? At the heart of my enquiry lay the fundamental questions. What do cyclones in Queensland literature reveal as tropes of apocalyptic, chaotic, and seemingly meaningless events? What are writers of Queensland literary works featuring cyclones attempting to convey about creativity, meaning and order in a natural world that can at times seem randomly destructive and meaningless?

Seeking answers to those questions within the scope of this thesis required establishing some boundaries. Consequently, this is not a historical, geographic, or meteorological study of

cyclonic weather events, nor is it a treatise on the effects of climate change. The dates, the science, the dimensions and intensity statistics of cyclones are relevant to other fields of research and so they do not appear in any detail here, as I do not intend that this thesis provide a complete history of Queensland cyclones. That project is for another day. My objectives are different here: this is a study of cyclones as a literary trope. However, given that there has been a rigid and relatively short time-frame for this research, there has been neither space nor time to consider every work of literature in Queensland that contains cyclones. Instead, I have endeavoured to focus on fiction and poetic works that I consider a representative sample of literature either written in or set in Queensland that demonstrates the scope of the cyclone as trope across the authors, styles and chronology of Queensland literature. My chapter sequence reflects this sampling in that I am moving through a chronology as well as discussing and establishing stylistic and thematic connections between authors.

While in this dissertation I explore what the literary cyclone experience reveals about the regional search for meaning amid the meaningless of disaster and what that disaster may reveal to the individual and to the shared community, I am also conscious that Queensland cyclone literature is very much a subset within the broader global literature of cyclonic storms in other tropical, as well as cooler, climate regions. Although some elements of the cyclone trope are distinctly regional to the Queensland tropics, other elements are shared with cyclonic storm tropes across the broader tropical zone and even with global storm tropes. In this thesis, then, I will aim to convey a sense of that connectivity and of the commonality of people's search for meaning amidst the meaningless of chaos and catastrophe.

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Chapter One

The Cyclone Written into the Language of Place

“Truly, at best, our apparent safety is but insecurity and our boasted power is but impotence. We speak at times as though we are conquering Nature, but the God of Nature speaks . . . and our scientific knowledge is of no avail to enable us to escape the gathering storm.” Mrs. Porter, survivor of Cyclone Mahina, 1899.

Cyclonic storms are an inevitable and integral part of the natural tropical seasonal cycle; they are a perpetual possibility reminding not only inhabitants of tropical regions such as North Queensland but indeed everyone that, as Gloucester wisely observes in *King Lear*, “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods” (IV, i, 1.36). Cyclones as apocalyptic natural catastrophes impel us into a revelation of our relationship with place. Although cyclones can be anticipated and their approach and predicted direction recorded on weather charts, they are not subject to human intervention. Their speed, eventual direction, severity and point of landfall are aspects that – while in reality influenced by meteorological elements such as air pressure, humidity levels, and water temperature – may seem mysterious and entirely whimsical to the average person. The end result is a regional weather event that reminds humanity of its limitations when faced with the forces of nature. “Truly, at best, our apparent safety is but insecurity and our boasted power is but impotence,” observed Mrs Porter, having in 1899 endured the onslaught of Cyclone Mahina, or the Bathurst Bay Hurricane. She and her husband, captain of the pearling lugger *Crest of the Wave*, were among the few survivors of Australia’s worst nature catastrophe in which some 350-400 people died in the region of Cape Melville in far northern Queensland, and her words are recorded in the first known book about a cyclone published in Queensland, *The Pearling Disaster, 1899: A Memorial*. “We speak at times as though we are conquering Nature,” she continued, “but the God of Nature speaks . . . and our scientific knowledge is of no avail to enable us to escape the gathering storm” (pp. 30-31). Like Mrs Porter, North Queenslanders regularly experience a similar epiphany that cyclones can be greater than the sum of their parts: they have the power to reveal our relationship with place and with each other. Cyclones have the power to take lives, to recreate lives and to change lives.

Cyclones can be the chaos that devastates the structure of everyday life, and in seeking to understand the reason for such chaos, people impart to the cyclone the qualities of apocalypse: the ultimate revelation. James Berger, a senior lecturer in English and American Studies at Yale

University, argues that to be truly apocalyptic, an event must in its disruption clarify and illuminate “the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (*After The End*, 1999, p. 5). Rather than being an end in itself, he explains, an apocalypse anticipates, reveals and explains the end. To see the cyclone as apocalypse, then, is to seek to understand what it explains and reveals, and in searching for the meaning of such chaos writers have explored the literary Queensland cyclone as an apocalyptic event that reveals new opportunities and new understanding, an event that may destroy but that can also recreate. Some writers such as Susan Hawthorne in her poetry cycle *Earth’s Breath* (2009) and Patrick White in *The Eye of the Storm* (1977) explore the epiphany: the intensely personal, perhaps even deeply spiritual, apocalyptic cyclone experience that may reveal storms within as well as without. In Meredith Traherne’s (1982) short story, “Cry of the Wild Wind,” the apocalypse of Cyclone Harry reveals to Lucy Morton, left home alone with three children, that she has the strength and courage with which to overcome her fears of her new North Queensland environment and deal with adversity. Having lost her father in an earlier storm, surviving a cyclone helps a young woman in S.G. Lerner’s “Chasing the Storm” (2014) to deal with her ultimate fear: the fear of death. For other writers, cyclones in such works as Thea Astley’s *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968) and Vance Palmer’s *Cyclone* (1947) reveal their flawed and anxious characters in the context of the broader world of their relationships, for better or for worse, with partners, family and community. We are all in this together, Astley proposes, because, “Everybody is living on a cyclonic edge” (Willbanks, 2008, p. 30).

Yet, while literary cyclones can expose hidden faults and fears, they can also inspire individuals to overcome those fears. In Astley’s novel, a small group bands together at the height of the cyclone in order to survive, despite their animosity and selfishness. At the end of Hugh Halcro’s short story, “Little Sigma” (1899), Jim Hardon realises that he is a member of the common church of humanity as he defies racial barriers and vows to raise the Australian Aboriginal baby boy that he finds protected by the body of his dead mother on top of a hill after a cyclone. In Esther Knight’s short story, “Monsoon Two”, she observes that the days after a cyclone brought “a flood of compassion. Many local people, who had suffered damage themselves, left their homes and farms to help others. Armed with chainsaws and tools, they just quietly entered streets . . . and generally did what they could” (2008, p. 25). Like them, the citizens of Palmer’s fictional version of Cairns also put aside their personal differences to work together in the aftermath of a cyclone to restore order to the town and to the community.

As part of their narrative search for meaning within cyclonic chaos, then, writers of Queensland literature may be reaffirming a communal cohesiveness within the regional cultural place. Those who survive cyclones are a unique community within the larger society, as is any

other group who endures catastrophe, for such experiences cause people to recognize a reality that encompasses trauma and chaos and so their perception of events is transformed in a way that sets them apart from others who have not been through such events. “There is a vast gap between those who have experienced the trauma and thus had reality disturbed,” trauma studies scholar Kali Tal observes, “and those who have not” (*Worlds of Hurt*, 1996, p. 134). Where once we may have perceived an ordered universe, that structure and purpose may no longer be apparent in the aftermath of traumatic events and, like Umberto Eco’s character William in *The Name of the Rose*, we might then declare that, “There was no plot and I discovered it by mistake” (1984, p. 599). Such a realisation enhances a feeling of survivor uniqueness, typified by what is perhaps the most profound summation in literature of the survivor’s experience of trauma in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851). Having endured the loss of the *Pequod* and all her crew, Ishmael repeats the words uttered in *The Bible* by catastrophe survivors when they bring their news to Job: “And I only am escaped alone to tell thee” (1967, p. 470, and Job 1:15, 16, 17, 19).

Nevertheless, although they may feel alone, such survivors are still part of the larger human community because what could happen to one could, at some time, happen to all. When catastrophe does happen, a culture already has in place an explanation of the structure and organization of their world. However, these events by their very chaotic nature threaten to overturn and overtake these explanations, so in their aftermath these cultural explanations need to be re-established so that the events and the survivors are re-incorporated into society so that the order and cohesiveness of society is maintained. Such changes in ways of thinking are evident in changes in metaphors, for example, so that the upward movement of the ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ of recovery becomes the metaphor that replaces the downwards journey ‘into hell’ of the disaster.

Typically, then, catastrophe events are quickly culturalized. Fatalities may be memorialised, shrines built, recovery programs instituted, and stories collected and published such as the first-hand accounts in *Cyclone Yasi: Our Stories* (2011), or in fictional forms that explore deeper cultural meanings of cyclonic events such as Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2007), or in poetry form such as Susan Hawthorne’s *Earth’s Breath* (2009). As this culturalization proceeds in the aftermath of the catastrophe, the stories become significant in strengthening communal ties that are important because, “It is the community that offers a cushion for pain, the community that offers a context for intimacy, the community that serves as the repository for binding traditions” (Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble*, 1995, p. 234). In recounting and repeating these stories – to others, among themselves, and on through successive generations – story-tellers continue to reveal and re-affirm relationships between the catastrophe and the community, between their place

and their culture. In doing so, they integrate and reconstruct into people's lives that which could have been potentially destructive. Such acceptance and integration is an important recognition of personal relationship to catastrophe events such as cyclones that are part of place and that, by their very seasonal repetition, perpetuate themselves within the culture of tropical regions such as Queensland. Each type of tropical cyclonic storm, whether cyclone, hurricane, or the 'divine wind' of a typhoon (Kerry Emanuel, *Divine Wind*, 2005, p. 5), has an impact on the regional imaginary that is specific and unique to the nature, history and culture of that region. Thus, the stories of the tropical cyclone can be significant to the regional sense of place, just as the stories of cyclonic storms can be inherent to an understanding of the tropical place.

Tropics and the cyclone

In *Meteorologica*, Aristotle theorized that there were only two habitable areas of the earth: one near the northern pole region and the other near the southern pole. "The lands beyond the tropics," he claimed, referring to the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, "were uninhabitable" (II. v. 362a. p. 181). He also suggested that somewhere on the other side of the world in the southern hemisphere, "there must be a region which bears to the other pole the same relation as that which we inhabit bears to our [northern] pole" (II. v. 362b. p. 183). The passing of time and further exploration eventually proved the ancient philosopher right about a Southern continent, but he could not have been more wrong about that area between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn now known as 'the tropics.' Contrary to those predictions, the tropical region is currently home to some 40% of the world's population and 80% of the planet's terrestrial biodiversity (*State of the Tropics*, 2014, p. 4), and it continues to develop; by 2050, approximately 55% of the world's population will live in the tropics (Sandra Harding, *The Tropical Agenda*, 2011, p. 2).

However, despite postcard promises of blue skies, clear water and balmy breezes, tropical regions are also home to extreme weather conditions, and one of the most significant atmospheric phenomena affecting this region is the tropical cyclone which, through a combination of high-speed winds, heavy rain and storm surges, can be severely destructive. William Strachey cast onto the virginal shores of the island of Bermuda in 1609 as a survivor of the wreck of the *Sea Venture*, later wrote in his *True Reportory of the Wracke* (1610) that, "These Ilands are often afflicted and rent with tempests, great strokes of thunder, lightning and raine in the extremitie of violence: . . . which keepe their unchangeable round, and rather thunder then blow from every corner about them, sometimes fortie eight hours together" (as cited in Murray, 1991, p. 91). Some 365 years later, survivors of Cyclone Tracy, which struck Darwin in 1974, remembered the sound of the

cyclone as “the scream of a banshee, a jet plane in your garden, forty thousand trains, and rather like an express train going through a tunnel but one that went on for hours and hours” (Cunningham, 2014, p. 41). Storm rotation varies according to hemisphere: counter-clockwise in the northern hemisphere and clockwise in the southern. Some of the cyclonic storms that originate over tropical and sub-tropical oceans may eventually make landfall, generally increasing in size, rotation wind speed and potential tidal surge depth as they move into shallower water. However, some cyclonic storms remain entirely at sea, such as the one that features in Joseph Conrad’s *Typhoon* (1903). Winds in these storms characteristically rotate around a centre of low barometric pressure, known as the ‘eye’, that is typically surrounded by a cliff-like ‘eye-wall’ of dense weather, leaving the eye clear. Seas within the eye may be remarkably calm and even populated with bird life. Maximum wind gusts within these rotating storms can reach 300km/h, rainfall has been recorded up to 1000ml in 24 hours, and storm surges have raised sea levels ten metres, resulting in loss of life and destruction of property, sometimes on a large scale (*State of the Tropics*, 2014, p. 48).

Occurring with cyclical seasonal regularity, such storms are historically endemic to tropical regions and consequently have been integrated into their life, culture and literature. To live successfully in the tropics, then, people not only accept the storm as an integral part of life and place but need to be prepared to heed the experience of the storm in order to embrace new worlds that may be revealed by it. In doing so, one may comprehend more about the relationship between person, people and biosphere in order to “better understand and better enable the tropical world” in which we live (Harding, 2011, p. 4).

These rotating storms are usually referred to by different names according to where they are located. In the north-west Pacific, they are termed typhoons. In the Atlantic and North-east Pacific, they are known as hurricanes, an English word derived from indigenous Carib, Mayan and Aztec names for an evil god of wind and destruction, such as *hurucan*, *hunraken* or *jurukan*. To the Tainos of the Caribbean he was Jurukan, son of the creation goddess Atabei. The early inhabitants of Cuba carved S-shaped images of their god Hurucan that consisted of a circular head with arms spiralling out from its sides, implying knowledge of storm rotation. This was long before amateur meteorologist William Redfield observed in 1821 that, after a hurricane struck Connecticut, trees had been blown down in a different direction on one side of the storm than on the other, eventually publishing his theories about rotating storms in 1838 (Emanuel, 2005, pp. 7,18, and Schwartz, 2015, pp. 6-9, 139-143). Rotating Southern Hemisphere tropical storms in regions such as Australia, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, the Coral Sea, Torres Strait, and the South Pacific were generically, and somewhat confusingly, referred to as

hurricanes or typhoons until the early twentieth century. Eventually they became exclusively known as cyclones after Henry Piddington coined the term from the Greek word for the coil of a snake. Although the word ‘cyclone’ may have been in use in America as early as 1821 (Longshore, 2008, p. 115), Piddington was the first to publish the word as a proposed collective noun for all rotating storms that travelled along a track (that is, they moved forward as well as rotated), as at that time ‘hurricane’ was used more as a description of the strength of a storm rather than type. Piddington – president of the Marine Courts in Calcutta – introduced the usage in his *Sailor’s Hornbook for the Law of Storms* (1848) the first widely accessible guide to successfully navigating a ship through a rotating storm (as cited in Emanuel, 2005, p. 19, and Schwartz, 2015, p. 141). By the time of his Third Edition of 1860, Piddington noted that the term ‘cyclone’ had already been so readily adopted for rotating storms that the term ‘cyclonology’ had been coined for the study of them (1860, p. 12). Cyclones are now typically defined as a storm that can form when sea-surface temperatures reach above 26.5°C. They characteristically sustain gale force winds in excess of 119kph near the centre and generate falling barometric pressure that have on occasion been the lowest on record. Cyclones are classified on a five-point scale of intensity according to the speed of maximum wind gusts; in the most severe storms, these can exceed 280kph. Needless to say, property damage can be extensive and lives can be lost due to impact by wind, flying debris, flooding and storm surges (Longshore, pp. 112-115).

Given such historic cultural connections, and the propensity for cyclones to be intense, life-changing personal experiences, it is hardly surprising that cyclonic storms have featured for centuries in world literature, given the potential for their violence and dramatic form to inspire the imagination, just as they feature prominently as image and trope throughout the history of Queensland literature: Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1975b, orig. 1610-11), for example, famously references that shipwreck of the *Sea Venture* in 1609 in a hurricane off the coast of Bermuda, some survivors of which eventually settled the island; Daniel Defoe’s *The Storm* (2005, orig. 1704) provides an account of the savage North Atlantic hurricane that devastated the British Isles in 1703; Joseph Conrad’s *Typhoon* (1975, orig. 1902) is the tale of the Siamese steamer *Nan-Shan*’s encounter with a storm in the China Seas; in Richard Hughes’ controversial 1929 novel *High Wind in Jamaica*, children struggle to survive being seized by pirates after a hurricane destroys their home; African-American author Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is based on events surrounding the Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928 in Florida; George R Stewart’s *Storm* (1941) is renowned for being the first American novel in which a cyclonic storm is given a personal name, Maria, and Jamaican author Diana McCauley’s *Huracan* (2012) explores the author’s family connections with Jamaica over several generations and the implications and

contradictions of beauty and violence, slavery and independence. Cyclonic storms have also featured in such international poetic works as Anne Finch's "Upon the Hurricane" (1713), William Cullen Bryant's "The Hurricane" (1855), William Hamilton Hayne's "A Cyclone at Sea" (1900), Hart Crane's "The Hurricane" (1927), A. B. 'Banjo' Patterson's "The Ballad of the Calliope" (1902), Adrienne Rich's "Storm Warnings" (1951), Edward Kamau Braithwaite's "Shar: Hurricane Poem" (1990), and Teresa Cader's "History of Hurricanes" (2009). (See Appendix B).

Yet, while these works are well-known in the international literature of storms, no comprehensive research has until now been carried out in Queensland to identify significant literary works featuring cyclonic storms and to examine the significance of the cyclonic storm trope within Queensland literature. To date, my research has identified the cyclonic trope within at least ten novels, sixteen short stories, some seventeen major poems and over a dozen published literary accounts of cyclones either written by authors born in Queensland or set within that state, most of which are referred to in this study, revealing a rich heritage of Queensland literary works featuring cyclones (See Appendix A). I have focussed the chapters on what I consider to be the major prose and poetry works within this canon that can withstand deep analysis, for my aims in this investigation are not only to demonstrate that writers have used the cyclone as a trope throughout the history of Queensland literature, but also to examine the relationship between the cyclone trope and Queenslander's sense of place. I aim to explore the use of the cyclone trope as a metaphor for epiphany and revelatory apocalypse, in the sense that Professor Morton Paley, University of California Berkeley, refers to as the "apocalyptic sublime" (1986, p. 1): a destructive event so terrible that it excites, as Burke puts it, the strongest imaginative emotions and responses. The term 'apocalypse' derives from the Greek *apokalupsis*, implying an unveiling and realisation of future events or meanings – a revelation – and in Queensland literature there is frequent reference to the literary cyclone as an instrument of fate or destiny, revealing to characters individually and collectively that they are part of the inevitable and uncontrollable cycle of death and birth, of change and renewal. The cyclone trope in Queensland literature is thus integral to the people and to the tropical place. Those caught up in the cyclone seek the meaning of it and in it, as they seek to integrate the experience as part of their lives within the tropical place.

Cyclone as catastrophe

However, before discussing the significance of the cyclone as part of place and the imaginative response to it in respect to the sublime, we need to first consider the cyclone as a nature catastrophe (or nature disaster) in terms of its impact on people and place in order to

appreciate the other part of Burke's equation: the terrible and the terror. The vast scope, yet intimate character, of the nature catastrophe means that those it effects may not readily understand it. "Disaster is, by definition, that which cannot be comprehended exactly," explains Martin Voss, head of the Disaster Research Unit at Freie Universitat Berlin, who argues that, "It is a hopelessly hybrid entity: inextricably entangling the natural and the social, freighting objectivity with subjectivity" (as cited in Coen, 2013, p. 3). French philosopher Maurice Blanchot agrees that it is difficult to define such events. "I call disaster that which does not have the ultimate for a limit," he writes; "it bears the ultimate away in the disaster" (*The Writing of the Disaster*, 1995, p. 28). As events that can be so difficult to mentally envisage, nature catastrophes challenge attempts to contextualize, to tell or to write about them, or even to learn and heal from them as an individual or as a society. Such events challenge the fundamental perceptions that we have of the world in which we live, perceptions that we might usually take for granted. Explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt observes in *Cosmos* (1849) that, for example, during an earthquake people experience a sudden revelation of the delusive nature of the inherent faith by which we had clung to a belief in the immobility of the solid parts of the Earth. . . . A moment destroys the illusion of a whole life – our deceptive faith in the repose of nature vanishes, and we feel transported as it were into a realm of unknown destructive forces . . . and we no longer trust the ground on which we stand (p. 212).

In effect, the nature catastrophe can unbalance the fundamental precepts by which people relate to their place, unbalancing their personal and material relationship with it.

In order to restore their faith in those precepts, people seek to understand Humboldt's "unknown destructive forces" and the effect they have on their place. As that understanding develops, so the relationship develops between people and place as they form a perception of their existence in that place. Anything that impacts on and disrupts that relationship, physically or psychologically, thus disrupts their perception of existence there. People prefer to think that life has meaning and context, whereas on the other hand catastrophe often reveals the arbitrariness of life, an aspect they would rather not confront. "We would often prefer to generate comforting myths about traumatic experiences," argues Kali Tal, "rather than acknowledge the arbitrary nature of life" (1996, p. 134). Because people prefer to assume that life has purpose rather than consider that it might be just a random series of events, they use myth and metaphor, trope and image, by which to communicate that the catastrophe has meaning and significance and that it might be part of the relationship between society and environment rather than an aberration.

The ancient Greeks believed that the threads of fate were eternally being woven into the fabric of an ongoing text narrative of life. If one thread was cut, that only marked the end of one

narrative thread, while the fabric of humanity's narrative continued to be woven. The death of any individual could possibly affect destiny, but it was not the end of destiny. One's fate was merely the product of those mechanisms of destiny begun by one's ancestors, and it would in turn be part of the destiny of those in the future. According to this perception of life, catastrophe was not a sign of disorder but was actually all part of the weave of one's fate and so it was, in fact, part of the ordered universe. According to this philosophy, catastrophe could be regarded as an event that is not a radical reversal of life in the sense that order has collapsed; rather, these events can reveal and confirm, through construction rather than destruction, the existence of another, alternative order.

In this way nature catastrophe can be seen as apocalyptic in character, presenting opportunities for renewal and reconstruction. They can be, as anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith argues, "all-encompassing occurrences, sweeping across every aspect of human life, impacting environmental, social, economic, political and biological conditions" (*Catastrophe and Culture*, 2002, p. 23). It is because of this very comprehensiveness of their impact on life, on stability of existence, that catastrophes often reveal the deeper social grammar of people as they search for reasons for these events and for their meaning, because people seek context for events so seemingly out of context to their daily lives, even though such a search may never be entirely successful. "No matter if the disaster stems from nature or from errant technology, no one, neither sage nor scientist, preacher nor president, can wholly tell the why or the where of a calamitous event," believes anthropologist and disaster expert Susanna Hoffman (2002, p. 113). Yet, in calamity's aftermath people invariably seek to write the why and wherefore of it because, as Blanchot maintains, "without language, nothing can be shown" (1995, p. 10), even if words may never be enough to address the true impact and scope of the event.

Thus, in their search to communicate, some people may seek meaning beyond words and so may rely on creative or mythical imagination, Hoffman proposes, arguing that, "The belief systems of people experiencing or expecting calamity are rife with symbols dealing with their situation, and their cosmologies are vibrant with metaphor" (2002, p. 113). Such tropes of catastrophe illuminate the event in the cultural mind, where they can act as a form of catharsis: a method of psychological survival for that society. "Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and re-tell the story of traumatic experience," explains Kali Tal, "to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized" (1996, p. 21). Society recognizes and validates these experiences by telling and re-telling the story of them, and so it gives the catastrophe a reality of substance and shape and

remembrance that people can use as a focal point for the release of catharsis in an attempt to render the unknown as known and so to cope with it.

In remembering by telling the story, then, people seek to incorporate that event into the woven fabric of society. That story may take the form of a ceremonial story, for example, that is ritually re-enacted at regular periods to reinforce the significance of the event in cultural history. Survivors of the event may physically meet on the anniversary of the event to participate in public memorial ceremonies; they might erect shrines or monuments, or write poetry or prose by way of commemoration in the hope that the catastrophe might be explained and contextualized for the society on which it impacted but also, perhaps, for others outside that society. Ultimately, people seek the revelation of the apocalypse that will answer their questions about why their house and their street and their way of life was destroyed and, perhaps above all, they want to know why people died while they lived. If only they can find the right symbol, the right name, the right book or poem or word, then all those questions that have no answers will be encapsulated in something by which people will be able to grasp the meaning of it all.

Naming the wind is an example of attempting to find that means by which the intangible can become tangible, by which the invisible can be made visible. The wind is an element that, after all, cannot actually be seen. Instead, one feels and sees the *effect* of the wind, and so cultural names for the wind suggest something of that regional sensory experience. For the Australian Aboriginal Euahlayi people in the Narran River region of north-western New South Wales, *Yarragerh* is the male spring wind who woos the three trees who are his wives: Budtha, Bibbil, and Bumble. When he breathes on them, they burst into shoots and buds, flowers and fruits, showing that their lover has arrived. *Douran Doura* is the hot, rain-bringing north wind that also woos trees, the coolabah and the kurrajong, that flower after they have been kissed by him (Parker, 1905, p. 100). The people of the Torres Strait islands rely on the sea and the wind to be able to travel and for their daily needs. The islanders need to know if it will be a good day for fishing, for the pearling luggers to go out using the *sager* (a brisk wind that causes the waves to be short and choppy) or whether they need to shelter from the *kuki*, a little cyclone but one that can still cause a lot of damage (Plater, 2011). The north-east trade wind of the Sahara region, famous for its heat and dust, is known as the *harmattan*, or ‘doctor’, because to colonists on the Guinea coast it brought relief from the humid wind off the sea. Switzerland has its crop-ripening *trauben-kocher*, or ‘grape-cooker,’ while in Morocco a south-easterly wind is the *mezzar-ifoullousen*, Berber for ‘that which plucks the fowls.’ North Africa has the suffocating, hot, dry and dust-laden *simoom*, derived from the Arabic for poison; the north-easterly wind of the Aegean is the *malteme* or bad-tempered. In Egypt there is a wind known as the *khamisin*, from the Arabic for fifty, because it

traditionally blows for fifty days, while the Rhone valley has its famous *mistral* (masterly) wind and Argentina has the dry *zonda* which blows down the Andes slopes in winter (DeBlieu, 1998, p. 173). In his book *Heaven's Breath* (1984), South African anthropologist Lyall Watson lists over 400 cultural names given to winds around the globe (pp. 330-344), so one can only agree with the Jan DeBlieu, the American landscape writer, when she concludes that, "To me, it seems that the wind yields its greatest influence not in the realm of the body but in that of the mind" (*Wind*, 1998, p. 177).

In Dorothy Scarborough's remarkable 1925 American novel *The Wind*, air exerts an influence on the realm of the mind so tangibly that it becomes one of the story's characters, as well as being a primeval and ultimately irresistible natural force. "The wind was the cause of it all," Scarborough declares. "The sand, too, had a share in it, and human beings were involved, but the wind was the primal force, and but for it the whole series of events would not have happened" (1979, p. 1). Although settlers on the Texas plains in Scarborough's novel have sought to tame and reduce the power of the ever-present wind by planting trees and building houses, that wind remains a force of nature to be respected. Scarborough's wind has an animal power she likens to that of a legendary black stallion with hoofs of fire that races, neighing wildly, over the prairie at night: "mighty in power, cruel in spirit, more feared than man" (p. 3). Scarborough suggests that the vengeful wind attempts to wear a woman down and drive her out as it wails "across waste places in the night, calling to her like a demon lover" (p. 4), because it is for women whom men are civilizing the plains. The woman on whom the wind seeks vengeance in this novel is Lettie, newly arrived at her brother's homestead from the very different landscape of Virginia. Despite the efforts of her friend Roddy to warn her that the wind will prey on her mind, once isolated at the remote homestead Lettie becomes convinced the wind is specifically seeking her out, determined to destroy her. She slowly succumbs to its insidious invasion of her mind, where it becomes "a force, a pitiless intelligence, as well as a power" that was the "evil mind" behind "all the evil that the sand did" (p. 199). Caught in a storm with Roddy, who offers to help her escape the area, Lettie is intimate with him and then blames it on the wind, claiming that it is deliberately driving her insane. She turns on Roddy and shoots him, but no sooner has she buried the body beneath a sand dune behind the homestead that the wind blows away the sand, threatening to expose the body and her as a killer. Finally, Lettie surrenders to the inevitable, running out into the storm that is calling to her, "borne along by the force of the wind that was at last to have its way with her" (p. 337).

Here the wind is both monster and myth, a primal force of nature in violent conflict with the power of humankind. The wind's power in Scarborough's novel is as much psychological as physical: Lettie's mental decline is intimately associated with place, for it is the un-ending

openness of the prairie in its natural form that provides this wind with the space within which to gather power, a power that Lettie unsuccessfully attempts to resist. The natural elements of place, implies Scarborough, can be vital and nurturing but may also have the potential to be demonically destructive on a scale that can be difficult to comprehend.

Conscious of the human inability to physically conceptualize the scope of nature catastrophes, writers seek a way of relating to such events through tropes. As Kali Tal explains, “When trauma is written as text, it transcends the bounds of the personal. It becomes metaphor” (1996, p. 132). Symbol and metaphor are significant when attempting to understand a disaster such as a cyclone because literature that contains them is often the only way of expressing events so chaotic, so out of the usual realm of experience that there is no way of adequately representing them. Such literature is, as the Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argues, “an articulation of life. It makes some experience visible and public. . . . Literature could be said, then, to code experience into words” (1976, p. 261). In other words, to articulate the unimaginable experience, such as a nature catastrophe, we employ the words of literature, and this thesis will explore and examine the ways in which writers have attempted to articulate and imagine in regional Queensland literature the unimaginable experience: the catastrophe of the cyclone.

In doing so, writers are seeking an understanding of this event within literature that transcends the bounds of the personal as they attempt to comprehend the scope and impact of a nature catastrophe. This is not an easy task, because cyclones do not fit into assumptions about ordered environments; rather, they are uncontrollable phenomena oppositional to our concepts of structure. Language can be a means by which people seek to grasp and contextualize weather events beyond the scope of their control; language can be a means of restoring order from chaos. The act of creating words, names, images, and meaning reinforces connection of the event to place and so establishes ownership of it. This cyclone impacted on this place because of the weather and the topography unique to that place, and so while a nature event may destroy that place, at the same time it is part of it and confirms that place in the minds of the people in it. The language, literature and trope of that nature catastrophe, that cyclone, become integrated into the place and into the life of the place. The trope links the individual to the place, encouraging a sense of belonging, as sense of *terroir*. Without it, we wander lost in a place in which we cannot conceptualize and contextualize what befalls us and in which, consequently, we cannot find meaning. The trope is thus an important means by which people are able to conceptualize, contextualize, and integrate the nature catastrophe into the place.

People, place and self

The English philosopher John Locke proposed in his 1689 *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* that a person was a thinking being capable of reason and reflection who was aware of the input from their senses and from their perceptions. They were thus aware of themselves as conscious beings separate from one another. Locke argued that it was the combination of thinking and consciousness that formed the self: an awareness of personal identity that distinguished the human being from other thinking things. That perception of self, of personal identity, was related to time and memory, he argued, for to be conscious was to be aware of the past. We perceive that with which we come into sensory contact, he argued, and then consider those perceptions in relation to ourselves in time. Thus we are beings temporally aware of who we are, not only as a result of present action but also as a product of past memory which, with perception, becomes “part of our selves: i.e. of our thinking conscious self” (Locke, 1984, p. 336). It was this conscious awareness of self and thus of personal identity that “makes a Man be himself to himself,” Locke argued, and so “personal Identity depends on that only” (p. 336). Locke did not consider that identity might in some way be related to place, which he saw simply as a constant geographical point in relation to other points. Place, he declared, was “made by men, for their common use, that by it they might be able to design the particular Position of Things” (p. 170). It was plain, he declared, “That our idea of place, is nothing else, but such a Relative Position of anything” (p. 171).

During the late twentieth century, however, opinion changed as various writers argued that there was more to place than being a geographical location: there are in fact relationships between person and place. Geographical and social philosophers such as Edward Relph in his *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and Yi-Fu Tuan in *Space and Place* (1977) both emphasise the experiential aspects of place – place as experienced by human beings – rather than place being merely a geographical feature. It is now largely accepted that we are the product of place and the environment in which we live, and that human awareness of self is closely connected to our experience of place. “Place has human context,” according to theologian James M. Houston. “Place implies belonging. It establishes identity. . . . Place is filled with memories of life that provide roots and give direction” (1978, p. 226). Place and self, rather than being separate, are in fact “essential to the being of the other,” argues philosopher Edward Casey in his book *Getting Back Into Place*. “In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place” (2001, p. 684). Place is more than a matter of geography: whether virtual, actual or imagined, place is constitutive of one’s sense of self.

The relationship of self with actual place, in fact, can be strengthened by its relationship with imagined or virtual place. John Agnew, a British-American political geographer, contends that, "Place is not only what is fleetingly observed in the landscape, a locale or setting for activity and social interaction. It is also what takes place ceaselessly, what contributes to history in a specific context through the creation and utilization of a physical setting" (1993, pp. 262-3). In being part of this 'ceaseless' activity related to a locale, people develop, according to Agnew, a "felt sense of the quality of life at a particular time and place." In short, they develop a "sense of place" that "reinforces the social-spatial definition of place from inside" (1993, p. 263). Place, then, can also be internalised; it can be a concept, a perception, a memory, or a product of imagination. While it always may be related in some way to the physical, a place may never actually be perceived physically or even be physical: it may be a place entirely within a person's mind but it remains, nevertheless, a place with which a person may have the same vivid and personal relationship as with a physical place.

The self may actually stand to gain by being able to move between places, whether physical or imagined, and perceive its relationship to and within those places. In answering the question of what connects the self to places, Edward Casey adopts Pierre Bourdieu's term *habitus* as a term for the connection point between nature and culture, consciousness and body, memory and imagination that constitutes the experience of place, the meeting place between lived and imagined place and geographical self. From that word, Casey then derives *habitudes* to describe our behaviours in that place that result from the quality of our experience in it (1993, p. 686). *Habitus* is, of course, linked to time and history in that we have various experiences associated with places during the course of one's life that may differ over time in terms of maturity, education and memory, for example. Those experiences, lodged within our memory, prompt attitudes or behaviours, *habitudes*, that collate to form the self, and so there is a reciprocity between self and place. We act on the basis of *habitus*: if the connection or relationship between self and place is positive, then our *habitude* is positive which reinforces the relationship, the *habitus*.

In other words, if we like the place, we want to stay there and inhabit it. As Casey contends, "The activation of *habitus* expresses an intentional and invested commitment to the place-world" (1993, p. 687). We make real our active commitment to place by inhabiting it, by establishing a psychological relationship as well as a physical one. The Latin root of inhabit is *habere*, to have or possess or to hold, and so to inhabit a place is to physically and mentally be in that place, to be holding it within one's purview. Place is not merely physical location; place is that which is also perceived and conceived in body and in mind, that which is actively lived in and experienced. Philosopher Martin Heidegger uses the word *Dasein*, broadly translated as 'being

there' or 'being in', to describe the relationship between people and place as "a relationship of dwelling – of inhabitation – in which there is a continuity between person and place": for him, being is "being-in-the-world" (Creswell, 2015, p. 27).

Experience of place can be a broad concept. Our lives are not necessarily limited to specific places, but are also "through, around, to and from them, from and to places elsewhere," as anthropologist Tim Ingold argues (*Being Alive*, 2011, p. 148). One is not so much in the world but of the world, he contends, travelling through the world rather than across it, establishing during our lives a network or aggregate of places – what Casey refers to as "their intertangled skein" (1993, p. 689) – that form a broader personal landscape as much of the senses and the imagination as of rocks and dirt. Place is more than that in which we stand; it can also be that which is personally seen, felt, remembered, and experienced, as Marcel Proust demonstrated in his epic work *À la recherche du temps perdu [In Search of Lost Time]* (1913-1927) in which memory of place plays such a vital role.

Person, place, and the broader landscape interact as part of the co-relationship between *habitus* and *habitude*: place may be shaped by people, but people can be shaped by place. (Malpas, 2011, p. 17). That relationship with place is a fusion of function, feeling and meaning that professor of landscape architecture Anne Whiston Spirn argues can be expressed as a language of landscape that is derived from the shaping of the landscape in the mind as well as physically (*The Language of Landscape*, 1998, p. 3, 8). John Brinkerhoff Jackson, perhaps the greatest writer on the forces that have shaped the American landscape, maintains that in reading and comprehending this language, person and place mutually interact and in this way a bond forms between them for places are not just a matter of aesthetics: they are also about sensory experiences of a familiar place that may include the "special kind of weather found nowhere else" (*The Necessity for Ruins*, 1980, p. 16). Commonalities of these experiences can be shared between groups of people, thus establishing communal bonds with places that can be psychological as well as physical. What such thinkers as Spirn, Jackson and Ingold are referring to here, then, is a semiotics of place: place can signify deep emotion and connections for people who may have similar experiences, memories and stories of that place, and so they speak and mutually understand the language of that place. In German, for example, the language roots for building, dwelling and 'I am' are the same: one is because one dwells. Words such as the Danish *landskab*, German *landschaft*, Dutch *landschap*, and English 'landscape' combine concepts of land as place and land as people, with *skabe* or *schaffen* meaning 'to shape,' as in the English 'ship' as used in 'partnership' and the Dutch *schappen* meaning to 'materially shape' in the sense of Biblical Creation. Much of this original linguistic association between word and an active relationship with place was largely lost when

‘landscape’ was assimilated into English from the Dutch as a painting term, *landskip*, referring to a framed representation of the countryside as seen by the artist (Schama, 1996, p. 10; Spirn, 1998, 16-17).

However, to see landscape as mere scenery gives precedence to appearance and risks trivializing it as decoration, as ‘landscaping.’ There is more to landscape as place than scenery because, as Spirn argues, it can also be an expression of ideas and actions that encourages an understanding of landscape as place, “as a continuum of meaning” (1998, p. 24). Rather than being a fixed point of view, landscape as place can be perceived as a concept that is continuously developing, fluent and malleable. The people who inhabit it can shape its meaning in various ways, forming it as a *landschap* in which words are integral to place, as those words form meanings that in turn shape the people. To be open to such interactive meanings, though, one must be actively involved with place mentally as well as physically, such as through writing and reading about it, as every experience can be both an expression and a perception of one’s relationship to that place.

People and place should be considered in a unified and holistic sense. According to Michael Kim Zapf, professor of social work at the University of Calgary, people “cannot be understood as separate from the natural world” because they are “entwined with the natural world in a continuing process of co-creation” (*Social Work and the Environment*, 2009, p. 190). The product of that process is a unique dynamic connection between place and people by which they form a particular relationship with that place, a relationship expressed in a language. Such a language, according to Spirn, may not be composed of only words. It might be spoken, written, read, or imagined (1998, p. 15); it might be a language of art, such as sculpture or painting, or music, or it could simply be a mutually agreed perception of what it means to be part of that particular place. In this way, we may be in place but also of place. Place can be a point on a map, but it can be a point within a landscape of memory or even a landscape of the imagination, urban or rural, village or city.

Such a dynamic perception enables place to ‘speak’ both *of* us and *to* us. Spirn goes as far as to claim, in fact, that such a dialogue between humanity and landscape was the original language people learned as they evolved on the earth under the sky among plants and animals. It has *always* been present, she argues; everyone still carries the legacy of that original language people had to learn in order to survive. Clouds, wind and sun were clues to weather that could impact directly on one’s life: being able to find a cave meant shelter, and navigating a river in the right place at the right time would ensure communication and continued existence (1998, p. 15). Riverboat pilot Samuel Clemens, better known as the great American writer Mark Twain, recognized that legacy of place-language when he observed of the river he was navigating in his

Old Times on the Mississippi (1876) that, “The face of the water, in time, became a wonderful book.” It was a book, he wrote, that “told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to be read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day. . . . There never was so wonderful a book written by man” (1967, p. 26). Here, Twain is conscious of the dynamic relationship between himself and place, implying in his references to books and stories that he can read a language of that place, thereby understanding the secrets of that place “as if it uttered them with a voice.” In the same sense that Spirn claims understanding a relationship with place was essential to early people’s survival, Twain learned to read the constantly changing pattern of hidden banks, snags, currents and bends of the Mississippi in order to successfully navigate the river. In other words, in order to maintain his relationship with place, Twain developed an on-going interactive relationship with the language of that particular place. While place may be a point of origin, then, because everybody comes from somewhere, place is where we are personally, in our language and literature as well as geographically.

Sense of place and terroir

Ever since the ancient Greeks stamped amphorae containing foodstuffs with the seal of the region from which they came, the producers of goods such as wine, coffee, tea and cheese have recognised the existence of a regional alchemy that the French termed *terroir*: the combination of plant genetics with elements such as geography, geology, mineral compounds, soil quality and climate that imparts particular characteristic qualities to a product of that region. Like good wine and cheese, literature too could be said to have *terroir*, in that the land where the literature is created and developed nourishes it and imparts unique qualities to it. Literature can be influenced by regional factors beyond the control of human hands, by qualities that give literature a sense of place. But, place as *terroir* is more than just locality; it is, as Australian rural sociologist Frank Vanclay observes in *Making Sense of Place* (2008), “space imbued with meaning” (p. 3): a space in which meanings are invested other than those relating to its physical geographic elements, such as the meaning of weather.

Ultimately, the personal relationship between the inhabitants of the region and these meanings gives place its 'sense.' For North Queenslanders, that sense of place includes the cyclones that have historically and continuously affected that region. Place is unique to the memory, history and associations of the individual person as well as to the community, and so sense of place is individualised as well as nationalised. Place can be, Vanclay contends, “the

coming together of the biophysical, social and spiritual worlds. Simply put, place is space that is special to someone" (2008, p. 3). Such affiliations can run deeper than connection to earth, rock and tree. Geologist and wine *terroir* expert James E. Wilson argues, for example, that beyond the tangible habitat there is a "spiritual aspect that recognizes the joys, the heartbreaks, the pride, the sweat, and the frustrations of its history" (2001, p. 141). Yet, as Zapf professed earlier, our relationship with place extends to the air and water around us that constitutes, as Jackson argued, a "special kind of weather found nowhere else" that is an integral part of a familiar place, a special place. Our place. Our *terroir*.

Weather is part of that *terroir* because, as Alexandra Harris declares in her examination of the intimate connections between British weather and the arts, *Weatherland* (2015), "Weather is written into our landscape" (p. 9). Weather is mutually constituted with people into their intimate, interactive perception of place. "We cannot view the environment as something separate from and distinctly outside ourselves," argues Zapf; "The environment is part of us and we are part of it. Air and water are inside as well as outside our bodies" (2009, p. 71). Humanity may shape place, but so does wind and water and temperature. Our relationship with place is intimate for, "To inhabit the open is . . . to be immersed in the incessant movements of wind and weather" (Ingold, 2011, p. 121). Like any intimate relationship in which one is involved, we draw our meaning from place and place draws its meaning from us because place and body "are the effective epicenters of the geographical self" (Casey, 1993, p. 690).

We are centred in our minds, in our imagination, around a perception of our place-world in which our body exists, and the weather of place is fundamental to this perception because we do not so much perceive place, but perceive in it. We see sunshine, hear rain, and feel snow; to live, we breathe air. People and place are immersed in fluxes of weather within which they engage with each other. "We breathe, think and dream in the regions of the air," declares David Macauley (Ingold, 2011, p. 135). In fact, Ingold elaborates, "the wind is not so much embodied as the body enwinded" (p. 139). That is, we do not just physically exist surrounded by wind: as living beings, we breathe the air and so we take the wind into us to become literally part of our elemental body. Breath and wind are intimately related: inhalation is wind become breath and exhalation is breath become wind. Queensland poet Susan Hawthorne recognized this relationship in the aftermath of Cyclone Larry when she wrote: "I am in with through the cyclone/which is inside with through me" (2009, p. 78). As she so vividly understands, people exist in a weather world that is within us as part of our perception of it as well as being constantly around us in the solid world on which we stand. Weather is part of who we are as well as where we are.

However, our perception of weather is largely a perception of its effects. Warmth may be felt but not touched, for example; clouds can be seen but not felt. “We come to understand places through the marks the wind has made on them,” Harris observes (2015, p. 9). In order to understand our relationship with weather as part of our place, we have to search for signs and clues of it in that place. Weather is part of the language of our *terroir*, and writers have responded to it using words, images and tropes as they attempt to understand their cultural relationship to it. As readers respond to those interpretations, weather becomes integral and significant to society’s cultural perception of place. “Literature endows common experience with significance” Spirn (1998, p. 80) argues, and so the literature of weather such as cyclones invites the regional society of North Queensland, who have shared the cyclone experience, to consider and respond to the significance of that experience to their cultural perception of their place, a perception that has always been important. In *The Bible’s* Book of Job, God asks Job from within a cyclonic storm some profound questions that relate to his cultural perceptions of weather’s origin and function. “Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, or have you seen the storehouses of the hail, which I have reserved for the time of trouble, for the day of battle and war?” God queries, before continuing to propose some of the most enduring questions in literature:

What is the way to where the light is distributed, or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth? Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain, and a way for the thunderbolt, to bring rain on a land where no man is, on the desert in which there is no man; to satisfy the waste and desolate land, and to make the ground put forth grass? Has rain a father, or who has begotten the drops of dew? (Job 38: 22-28)

These questions are of course rhetorical: Job (and the reader) is expected to know that the answer to ‘who’ here will always be God. But, there is more to these questions than a single word answer, for they were also intended to remind people of their relationship to nature as place. Rain, wind, light and storms were all part of the weather over which humanity had no control. They would just have to accept there would always be questions about nature and place to which there might never be answers.

The power of weather as part of place lies in its potential to not only physically be, but also to symbolize or evoke. It can be both tangible entity and metaphor: spring as life or winter as death, for example. While we can really only know the force and feel of wind and weather by being in it, our appreciation of them can at the same time be enhanced through word and image which is then intermingled with our physical sensory response. In this way, the weather is constantly being re-created and re-imagined. In *Paradise Lost*, for example, variations in weather are originated as a divine penalty when God punishes Adam and Eve (and future humanity) after

Eve yields to temptation. Previously there had been a uniform climate within the Garden of Eden, but Milton's Divine Being employs his angels to alter the orbit of the sun in order to create temperature zones, introduces thunder as an instrument of terror, and sets the winds to "their corners, when with bluster to confound/ Sea, air, and shore." Neither had there been any seasons, but God now bids the angels to physically push "oblique the centric globe . . . to bring in change/ Of seasons to each clime," and the effect is that,

These changes in the heavens, though slow, produced
Like change on sea and land – sidereal blast,
Vapor, and mist, and exhalation hot,
Corrupt and pestilent. . . .

And snow, and hail, and stormy gust and flaw (1951, pp. 248-9, ll.651-706).

According to Milton's imagination here, weather has a moral dimension. Seasonal variations are not just a matter of meteorology and geography; they are the result of the fall of humanity into a state of sin. For Milton, the physical environment was a product of the spiritual environment.

In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, on the other hand, she uses weather to imaginatively evoke historic eras. On the last night of the eighteenth century, for example, Orlando leans out from the window of her London home amid "light, order, and serenity." As she watches, a small cloud gathers behind the dome of St. Paul's and rapidly spreads across the sky as the chimes of midnight sound, and by the stroke of eleven, "a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London," and by midnight a "turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun." By daybreak, the cloud extends over the entire British Isles, and consequently the air becomes saturated with rain, damp seeps into buildings, people become cold, beards are grown, clothes secured tightly, furniture is covered, and ivy encouraged by rain grows profusely. As the climate changes, "stealthily and imperceptibly . . . the constitution of England was altered" (Woolf, 1993, pp. 156-7). As Woolf uses the characteristically gloomy weather of England to evoke place, Queensland author Thea Astley uses cyclones, an iconic element of tropical North Queensland weather, to not only evoke a specific locale but to speak to the broader meaning of the relationship between person and place, between *habitus*, *habitude* and *habitant*. In her novels *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1986), *It's Raining in Mango* (1989), and *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (2010), the storm reveals the true nature of characters trapped within whirling vortexes of circumstances, teetering on the edges of their own personal cyclones. As Harris suggests, "Weather is one of the most powerful threads holding us together" (2015, p. 12), and weather interacts with person as part of

the language of landscape in literature. In seeking an understanding of the cyclone as part of that literary language of North Queensland place, we need to understand that place as tropical place.

Queensland as Tropical Place

Historically, there has been a contrast in perception between the temperate and the tropical zones. The tropical zone has been traditionally characterized as the uninhibited, violent and primitive foil to the civilized and cultivated nature of the temperate. “It is to the inhabitants of the temperate zone,” declared the otherwise enlightened naturalist, explorer and philosopher Alexander von Humboldt in 1849,

that the rest of mankind owes the earliest revelation of an intimate and rational acquaintance with the forces governing the physical world. Moreover, it is from the same zone (which is apparently more favorable to the progress of reason, the softening of manners, and the security of public liberty), that the germs of civilisation have been carried to the regions of the tropics” (p. 15).

European engagement with the tropics has over time embraced such duality. On the one hand, the tropics is perceived as a place of paradise but on the other, it is pestilential; on the one hand, it has been perceived as a golden Eldorado of light, but on the other it is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) inhabited by Mr. Kurtz sent mad by the jungle.

Typically, North Queensland as imagined and envisioned tropical place has been perceived by writers in those same dualities of light and dark. For some, their experience is in terms of intensities of light and beauty. Australian science journalist Rosaleen Love writes in *Reefscape* (2000) that her experience on the Great Barrier Reef encouraged her to explore different perceptions of her relationship to beauty and to place. “From ‘sense of wonder’ at the beauty of reef life,” she maintains, “it is a small step to the notion of the ‘sense of the sublime,’ the sense that here is something so wonderful that it transcends the existence of the individual caught up in this particular time and place” (p. 222). Even if one is not a believer in a traditional God and thus does not feel a sense of awe in religious terms or that the “other-worldly nature of the reef experience is a glimpse of Paradise,” she argues, “the beauty of the reef allows the non-believer imaginative space to take the notion of ‘awe’ seriously.” In fact, she claims, diving on the reef actually changes one’s perception of their place in the universe because, “Going underwater is a view from the bottom up,” instead of the more customary view of life from “the privileged position of air-dwellers” (p. 223). Writing about her time living on Green Island, Nettie Palmer wrote that, “This gleaming little forest of vines and evergreens can seem at times more wonderful than the coral reef

itself. There's a gentleness about it . . ." (1988, p. 82). She was entranced by the "immense apparent nothingness of sea and sky" (p. 82), and by "endless, subtle rich colours" of coral that caused "your eyes to swim with the heavenly tones" (p. 92). North Queensland is a place where the days are so rich in sensation that one can actually taste them, according to Thea Astley, who once described a tropical day there as "a juicy fruit, warm, dripping with frangipani and an overlying tang of salt" (1993a, p. 215).

On the other hand, the North Queensland tropics can be a place of contradictions, "a moody place, a canvas of wild beauty and drama, where exotic landscapes huddle together, juxtaposed in strange patterns as if they don't belong, yet exist as if for some mysterious, unknown purpose," according to journalist Robert Reid. To him, the ancient regional landscapes defy the usual perceptions of tropical, varying between mountain ranges and rainforests to extensive savannah grasslands, delta mangrove wetlands inhabited by crocodiles and wild pigs, and many kilometres of white sand coastline. This is a place where destructive forces of "primeval nature," such as monsoon rains, floods, and cyclonic winds, constitute part of the tropical year, "the season of drama and danger," and so it is a place where "life blooms large and vibrant, but death strikes quickly, returning physical existence to the earth with savage finality" (*Under A Dark Moon*, 2003, Introduction). The tropics can be a place of difference where beauty, danger and death co-exist.

The North Queensland tropical place imagined by Janette Turner Hospital is no heart of darkness for, "In the Sunshine State, we resist shadow," she writes. "We don't believe in darkness" (*Forecast: Turbulence*, 2011, p. 218). However, Hospital's fiction does not resist some of the shadows of her childhood *terroir*. She characteristically structures her work as lantana-like puzzles in which the time scheme and narrative are fragmented and out of sequence, enticing readers to make their way into them as explorers in order to discover meaning. According to critic David Callahan, they are "rainforest narratives" in which the "profusion and entanglements of the rainforest serve as a model for Hospital's fictional strategies" (2009, p. 2). Her characters become entangled in webs and nettings of association that, "both invites symbolic exploration and confounds it," he argues, "just as the rainforest's exuberance can invite physical exploration and confound it" (2009, p. 3). Hospital's fictional tropical place is characteristic of her early *terroir*, in which many of her characters inhabit a remembered, imagined Queensland. In her story, "You Gave Me Hyacinths," for example, it is "the pungent and fertile tropical landscape that suggests to Hospital the intertwined complexity of the world" (Callahan, 2009, p. 112). The opening sentences of this story are some of the most evocative imaginings of landscape in any story set in North Queensland:

Summer comes hot and steamy, with the heavy smell of raw sugar to the north-east coast of Australia. The cane pushes through the rotting window blinds and grows into the cracks and corners of the mind. It ripens in the heart at night, and its crushed sweetness drips into dreams (Hospital, 1995c, p. 15).

One of the ironies of this story, however, is that this richness is not reflected in the lives of the inhabitants but, instead, it is reflected in the unique Cooktown orchids. Hospital's landscape is an active place that is an example of the unruly and tangled moral universe of her characters, but is also often evocative of loss.

A homeland that Hospital left behind in order to live overseas, Queensland is a place to which she frequently returns in her prose as a landscape of memoir, a "site of narrative and moral intensity in which both loss and gain, displacement and engagement are referenced" (Callahan, 2009, p. 135). Perhaps the one work of hers in which these elements are best collected is "Litany for the Homeland," in which she considers the connections and networks between places. "Where the St Lawrence is still mostly skating rink but part flow," she writes, "I have smelled and touched Queensland. I have woken, disoriented, to see orchids in snowdrifts. . . . I have smelled rainforest" (1995a, p. 422). She recognizes that, as Ingold suggests, our lives ebb and flow "from and to places elsewhere" and so she perceives that "Queensland itself is fluid in shape and size, it ebbs and flows and refuses to be anchored in space . . . It is always larger than would appear on the map." Her terroir, "where the evening star goes down, and where the first ones and the late-comers make temporary camp together under the violent stars," will always be part of her, will always be her. "Wherever I am," she believes, "I live in Queensland" (p. 422).

In that encounter between tropic environment and the senses, there is intersection between what is known and what can be represented. 'The tropics' as larger place is in turn a network of places that are tropical in their own way, according to the many ways, diverse and similar, in which human beings inhabit and represent them. The envisioned tropical North Queensland landscape is a unique place. As the American Deep South is different from the rest of the United States, tropical North Queensland is not the same as other Australian landscapes, yet it can exert a magnetic attraction just by virtue of that uniqueness. According to David Malouf, it was the very fact that there was "a place that was uncontrolled and uncontrollable that first attracted me and attracts me still." After all, he asks,

Isn't that what is meant by exotic? A hope that somewhere close there was a place that belonged to us and that was in a sense ours, but that had escaped the laws and the interpretations we like to impose and remained unknown within us. Darkly mysterious. Overgrown and hard to find our way into. Not yet mapped or fully

described. Where we, too, when we entered it, might become other and unknown, even to ourselves” (2014, p. 77).

In its very uniqueness, North Queensland reveals Australian cultural uniformity to be a cultural myth, perhaps suggesting that it might be time to forget likeness and instead be more inclusive of the many varieties of difference that Australians now exhibit.

North Queensland as a region incorporates that sense of difference into its very *habitus* so completely that in Hospital’s story, “The Second Coming of Come-by-Chance,” a reporter for the *Melbourne Age* newspaper wonders if indeed Queensland actually exists. Perhaps, he ponders, Queensland is just a primitive state of mind from which most people have evolved, “our own Gothic invention, a kind of morality play, the Bosch canvas of the Australian psyche, a sort of perpetual *memento mori* that points to the frailty of the skein of civilization reaching out so tentatively from our southern cities” (1995b, p. 220). In Thea Astley’s essay “Being a Queenslander,” she proposes that it is, in fact, this sense of being different from other Australian states that distinguishes the Queensland cultural landscape. It is a sense of difference, she argues, that has developed over the years for various reasons, such as, “the isolation of the place, the monstrous distances, the very genuine suspicions of political neglect” (1976, p. 252). Associated with those factors is a refusal to conform. The architecture does not duplicate that of the rest of the country, for example, with its “houses perched on stilts like teetering swamp birds,” seemingly designed for occupants to live underneath them (p. 252). Some of these differences are not as apparent now as they were when the essay was written, but argumentatively they are still buried in the Queensland psyche. Nevertheless, as Astley observed, Queenslanders do still dress differently and their manners are laconic in tune with the high temperatures of the tropics. In fact, this frame of mind was observed as early as 1893 by a newspaper journalist who, in an article titled, “A Northern Pilgrimage,” declared that, “there are no people in the world who are more sanguine than those of North Queensland. Nothing crushes or daunts them. Out from every disaster they rise serenely and hopefully.” The reporter suggests that such an attitude could primarily be due to the tropical weather for, “It is almost impossible to be otherwise in a land of blue sky and white light. Day after day the sun shines in unclouded vigour and its brightness and intensity creates, and perpetuates an optimistic spirit. . . . Under all circumstances it is necessary to keep a stiff upper lip.” Much like David Malouf, this journalist concluded that, “Life up here is freedom itself.” (A Northern Pilgrimage, 1893, p. 750).

Yet freedom can imprison and constant beauty can eventually overwhelm and even seem dangerous. The Antiguan-American novelist and essayist Jamaica Kincaid once wrote that the Caribbean island of Antigua is,

too beautiful. Sometimes the beauty of it seems unreal. Sometimes the beauty of it seems as if it were stage sets for a play . . . all of this is so beautiful, all of this is not real like any other real thing there is. It is as if, then, the beauty . . . were a prison, and as if everything and everybody inside it were locked in and everything and everybody that is not inside were locked out. And what might it do to ordinary people . . . to live in such heightened, intense surroundings day after day?" (2000, pp. 77-79)

The British writer Alec Waugh, elder brother of Evelyn, having "been told that so many things are dangerous in the tropics," agreed in his *Hot Countries* (1930, p. 98) that when it came to people living in such tropical surroundings, the tropics could actually be its own worst enemy. Tahiti, he wrote, suffered from, "The fatal gift of beauty," betrayed to the invasion of European society "by her loveliness, her own sweetness, her own gentleness" (p. 73). In his novel of life on the Queensland Gold Coast, *A Night at The Pink Poodle* (1995), Matthew Condon's protagonist looks down on the city from a helicopter and senses that same danger lurking within the beauty. Marvelling "how watery the whole place was, how precarious," he realizes that the intense beauty of his paradise is only increasing his sense of insecurity. The buildings are just "tenuously stacked on fingers of what were nothing more than strips of and nodules of sand" (p. 101). Abruptly aware that the sea level would only have to rise slightly to wash it all away, he suddenly perceives the canals as threatening, the surf as "a killer in waiting," and the Nerang River as a serpent. "Perhaps it was what made the coast so mad," he decides. "Here it was, teetering on the edge of the Pacific, leaning towards the sea" (p. 101). In fact, all of Australia leans towards the sea, towards the coast where most of the population lives, and Queensland along with it. "The world spins in the margins of space," Janette Turner Hospital observes, "Australians float in the edges of the world. Queenslanders live in the rind of Australia" (1995a, p. 422). So for many Queenslanders, place is coastal place: littoral place.

No other nation except Russia looks out onto three great oceans. Australia is, as the national anthem suggests, "girt by sea": the Pacific Ocean, the Southern Ocean and the Indian Ocean. The continent is bounded by some 36,700km of coastline, which includes approximately 10,685 beaches and 1800 islands (Huntsman, 2001, 5). While Australia has traditionally celebrated 'the bush' in its eternal, desperate search for lasting stereotypes of 'Australian-ness,' in was in fact the coast which in the early decades of settlement was the focus of trade, exploration, transport, industry and encounter, and in many ways it remains so. "The littoral is a place of encounter, where new waves must reconcile with old waves, where things can flow in two directions at once," maintain Australian literature researchers Sue and Rick Hosking (*Something Rich and Strange*,

2009, p. vii). However, by the latter part of the nineteenth century, the bush had taken on significance in the minds and hearts of Australian writers and there was relative indifference to the coast and beach. As the nation's sense of self developed and emerged during that period, it was the idea of the bushman pioneer as a national type that became influential. The pervasive presence of the bush led to a view that Australia lay somewhere out west, somewhere that was a different country than the coast, somewhere that had to be tamed, subdued, owned, cultivated, developed as explorers and pioneers were drawn inland by their expectations of what they could observe and find. Perceived as a place with no such promise on which nothing could be built or grown, the coast was left out of the general nation-building until the early twentieth century when it began to develop importance as a place of recreation, of freedom, of physical well-being and, eventually, as a place of communion with nature. Eventually, too, people came to appreciate that it could be occupied, built on and developed, and so the coast became part of the national economy as a community with a particular life-style into which was interwoven and perpetuated those traditional cultural themes of love and desire, loss and death. Whereas the coast as place, where the land ended abruptly at the sea, was previously considered the edge, the margin of Australia, it is now perceived as a significant place of creativity and potential. The edge is being recreated and redefined; the coast is now where things happen and discoveries are made. "It has now become clear," argues Philip Drew in *The Coast Dwellers* (1994), "that the coast, not the outback, is central to the Australian imagination" (p. xi). "The coast," he continues, "replaces the centre as the chief spatial and symbolic focus in our culture" (p. 3). However, at the same time, the coast remains an unpredictable place. It can be a place of license and freedom but it can also be a place that is sinister and threatening: crimes take place on the sand and there are sharks and poisonous jellyfish in the water. The coast is a place of flux, child development lecturer Leone Huntsman points out: it "never is, is always becoming" (*Sand in Our Souls*, 2001, p. 173). Changing size and shape with wind and wave, the Australian coast is not just leaning towards the sea, but also towards the weather coming in from a sea that is constantly attempting to wash the coast away.

North Queensland cyclone

Cyclones are endemic to the North Queensland coast, as they are to other tropical regions, and they have been regularly impacting this region for thousands of years (Nott and Hayne, 2001, 508). Research of storm surge ridges carried out by university researchers Nott, Smithers, Walsh and Rhodes (2009) suggests that cyclones have been striking the shores of Australia along the Great Barrier Reef and Gulf of Carpentaria for nearly 6000 years, well before the Chinese were

writing about typhoons. “The marks of such cyclones, and the tracks of tornadoes,” wrote nineteenth-century explorer and historian Ernest Favenc of his early visits to North Queensland, “were plainly visible in what were then practically virgin coast lands”(1903, p. 7). The earliest recorded cyclone to make landfall in Queensland after European settlement was the storm that in 1854 flattened the tent township that would become Gladstone and sank shipping there. Many cyclones have since struck the Queensland coast over the years. “Both Bowen and Townsville, during my stay of some 16 or 17 years . . . were almost periodically visited and scourged by these visitations,” recalled Favenc who, observing that cyclones had been particularly prevalent during the 1860s and 1870s, concluded that “both these towns lie in a belt peculiarly liable to cyclonic influence” (1903, p. 7). Most major towns and cities along the North Queensland coast, such as Mackay, Townsville, Cairns, Port Douglas, and Cooktown have at some time been either destroyed or severely damaged by cyclones, some more than once, and the effects of some cyclones have been experienced in Brisbane and into North New South Wales. In Australian history, the largest loss of life to occur as the result of a natural disaster was the impact of Cyclone Mahina – also known as the Bathurst Bay Hurricane – which struck the Torres Strait pearling fleet sheltering in Bathurst and Princess Charlotte Bays near Cape Melville, North Queensland on 4 March 1899, killing over 300 people.

North Queenslanders, then, necessarily established an early, significant and personal relationship with this unique weather event. By their very nature unpredictable, uncontrollable and unavoidable, cyclones have been integrated by the inhabitants into coastal Queensland life so successfully that the period between November and April is known in North Queensland as the ‘cyclone season.’ In fact, it was a Queensland meteorologist who was the first person to systematically name cyclonic storms, when on 20 September, 1894, Clement Wragge, the Queensland Government Meteorologist and Superintendent of the Chief Weather Bureau in Brisbane, gave the name ‘Beta’ to a storm approaching Lord Howe Island. Wragge developed a chain of weather stations from which he gathered data that eventually extended off-shore as far east as New Caledonia to enable him to detect potential cyclones as soon as possible. The well-read meteorologist then translated this data into weather maps published in Queensland newspapers, along with forecasts and announcements of meteorological events (including storms and cyclones) full of literary flourishes and allusions, making Wragge the earliest known European Australian to publish cyclone literature. However, as his wealth of information accumulated, Wragge needed to distinguish between multiple low pressure storm systems off the Australian coast. Traditionally, cyclonic storms had been randomly named for the day or place of landfall, but this custom was hardly going to work for weather that was still out at sea, and so Wragge decided

to systematically name tropical storm systems using the letters of the Greek alphabet. It did not take long to work through that list, though, and so he quickly moved on to other language alphabets and then names of people, including the occasional politician. Consequently, his naming system not only signified storms but eventually also imbued them with individual personality and character.

In his lectures, published forecasts and commentary, Wragge revealed his awareness that cyclonic storms, like people, impact on place and on the imagination. As the effects of the southwestern edge of Cyclone Sana were being experienced along the Queensland coast near Bundaberg in March, 1898, for example, Wragge predicted in the *Gympie Times* that “a grand performance on the meteorological organ of Australia is in store for us! How the isobars, like the strings of the harp, will vibrate and shiver, each to its respective note” (Wragge, 22 February, 1898, p. 3)! This particular storm certainly appears to have sparked Wragge’s imagination, as it quickly develops in his mind from an organ recital to a full theatre performance. “What a grand meteorological opera is in progress,” he enthuses two days later in the *Brisbane Courier*, suggesting that people between Bundaberg and Ballina should regret they could only hear part of the storm concert, whereas those in New Caledonia would be able to be present for the full event:

The sea in sympathy and its stentorian bass to the whirring of the wind, anon roaring around some cavernous bluff, then lashing the cliffs in angry tones with supernal cascades of majestic beauty - while modulating the sonata, in turn, to the hissing, seething notes of bubbling foam. But . . . in New Caledonia . . . will 'Sana,' the storm empress of the Pacific, soon perform her marvellous evolutions, and dance her wildest step. . . . Sana will give music of a very different type, wielding her baton to the delirious chords of Nature. (Wragge, 24 February, 1898, p. 5)

Wragge endows his “storm empress” with emotive and personified allegories of music and dance, associating both with the sublime in tune with Edmund Burke’s interpretation some 140 years earlier in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), in which he proposed that,

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure (p. 36).

It follows that both Burke and Wragge were aware that nature has two sides: beauty and pleasure, terror and pain. Like Burke, Wragge knew that cyclones can provoke emotion and imagination; he too could see the sublime within that whirling storm.

By its very nature, the cyclone is unpredictable, uncontrollable and unavoidable, but it is part of Queensland life. Those who live there have realised that “cyclone knowledge is by default about the condition of tropical life,” as Collet, McDougall, and Thomas (2017, p. 10) maintain, and in order to live that life Queenslanders have historically considered that their duty is not to surrender in the face of such extreme weather. “Our townsmen, however, do not intend to give in,” wrote a Cairns journalist after the cyclone of 1878, pointing out that rebuilding work was already under way for, “this sort of thing is of the north. ‘Hard work’ is the motto for nearly every one above Cape Palmerston.” With no small quota of parochial pride, they added, “We have no idlers; when we want rest, we come amongst you southerners” (“Destructive Tornado at Cairns”, 1878, p. 3). The sentiment had not changed a few years later. Referring to Cyclone Leonta that devastated Townsville in 1903, a newspaper journalist reporting on the Mackay cyclone and storm surge flood of 1918 amid chaos “hardly describable in language,” wrote that

what one relates as actual facts must beget a scornful jeer from people who have only seen a strong southerly gale in Sydney. We hear a good deal nowadays of shell-shock. Men who have gone through a tropical cyclone on land realise what that is, but will not be persuaded that any terror that human ingenuity can invent is able to stand comparison for a moment with Nature in a mad mood” (“North Queensland Cyclone”, 1918, p. 3.).

A local woman echoed similar sentiments when she wrote in a published letter after the same event that, “You southern people can’t realise what we pioneers of the North go through” (“Chatty Mackay Letter”, 1918, p. 3). Unlike those people south of the border, tough Queenslanders could survive anything. The Right Reverend George Frodsham, Anglican Bishop of North Queensland, recalled after the 1903 Townsville cyclone that, “I was deeply impressed by the fortitude and spirit of the people in Townsville. I never heard a man or woman complain. They were hard at work the next morning trying to gather up the ruins of their homes” (“The Townsville Cyclone”, 1903, p. 6). Elevating the Mackay cyclone event to nobler heights of endurance than mere catastrophe, the editor of the *Cairns Post* made reference to World War One when he declared that, “As if there was not already sufficient sorrow in the world, it has pleased destiny to write yet another chapter in the ‘Martyrdom of Man’” (“The Mackay Disaster”, 1918, p. 4). Nearly ninety years later, those sentiments had not changed. After Severe Tropical Cyclone Larry destroyed Innisfail in 2006, General Cosgrove, Head of Operation Recovery Task Force, wrote that, “I knew that the people of

the Far North were built of strong stuff. They proved it yet again after Larry. They took an almighty body blow, but they dusted themselves off and got on with their lives as best they could” (Operation Recovery Task Force Team, 2007, p. 7).

Cyclones are thus part of Queensland place in that people have taken the weather event and incorporated the character of the place into their own character. As the cyclone has been integrated into the Queensland sense of place, so Queensland writers have incorporated it into the literary landscape. In this way, the narratives of the cyclone have become part of their narrative of place, a narrative that is an indigenous force in that it has given them a voice. Their narrative has become an expression of both a material and a mythic force that might on the one hand destroy but on the other hand can be a tool for survival and point the way to post-disaster restoration. “Narratives of cyclones are not mere records of destruction,” agrees French language and literature lecturer and researcher Dr Srilata Ravi. “They also reveal liminal spaces between ocean and land, the textual and the imagined – spaces of rehabilitation where the cyclones are ‘heard’ and acts of positive human interactions with nature are performed. Literature has the potential to provide a forum for those whose voices (nature’s and human’s) are not always heard . . .” (2017, p. 40). Thus the cyclone narrative, whether imagined or factual, becomes part of place, a narrative of the terroir that can be experienced by the one as well as the many; it is the terroir embedded in the senses and stories of the individual that eventually becomes the terroir of the people. “In telling stories about our places,” Vanclay proposes, we create and re-create; revise and adjust; confirm and re-confirm; affirm and re-affirm our connections to place. Storytelling is a way in which any place becomes ‘our place’ or ‘our patch’ where we assert some authority, or ownership, or at least some connection to a place (Vanclay, Higgins & Blackshaw, 2008, p. 5). The more often stories containing that sense of place are told, then, the more that connection, that terroir, is reconfirmed. The great spinning wheel of the cyclone as a trope in Queensland literature is about more than the weather; it is about the cycle of life itself.

People and place mapped into texture and structure of story

One way of attempting to understand our relationship to people and place is to place it within stories. In this way, “we live within worlds of stories, and we use those stories to shape those worlds” (Potteiger & Purinton, 1998, p. 3). Those stories embrace multiple formats such as fiction, non-fiction, lived experience, myth, anecdote, oral history and legend, and they tell of origins, causes, boundaries political, geographical, or ethical, of what is known while pointing towards future possibilities and explorations. As we remember, interpret, plan and dream through

such narratives, they give form to our lives. Narrative refers to both story – what is told – and the means of telling the story, and so it is a more comprehensive and inclusive term than ‘story’.

Narrative is ultimately a language of time, selecting certain events and linking them together in sequence to form a shape of time. Altering the sequence would alter the shape and thus the meaning of the story, and so meaning resides not in just what is told, but in how it is told. The narratives that are there in that place, that shape people and place, are formed as a product of intersection with places; they accumulate as layers of history, tell of events associated with place, and are thus assimilated into the place and the people. In effect, the interplay between narrative, place and people forms an integral part of the terroir. In this way, both people and place become mapped into the texture and structure of the narrative of place. “Every narrative . . . plays a critical role in making place,” argue landscape architects Potteiger and Purinton in *Landscape Narratives* (1998). “It is through narrative that we interpret the processes and events of place. We come to know a place because we know its stories” (p. 6). Narrative can become a tangible part of place, written into place as it were. People may know a site, visit a location, because of its association with a film or novel or historic event, for example. Thus an understanding of that place is both because of that association and because it is enhanced through that association. For example, when visiting Silverton, out beyond Broken Hill, does one see a striking desert or do we see the place that serves as a backdrop to the adventures of Mad Max? If we visit Monument Valley in the United States, do we have in our minds a mental image of John Wayne riding through it? In this way, the superimposition of film character onto place may add to or detract from the quality of our narrative of place. Likewise, the superimposition of weather on to place may add or detract from that place narrative. If a cyclone destroys a town, for example, then that experience becomes part of the narrative of the people in that town. Their story is forever influenced by an event that may detract from the narrative of that place so significantly that eventually they might leave that place, never able to live there again. On the other hand, that weather catastrophe may provide an impetus for change and for an improved life style in a re-built town. Either way, the narrative of that place can develop into a very tangible, personal and relative story that not only forms that place but also eventually becomes the individual and collective place. Every time someone walks the streets, they may hear the wind, dodge debris, feel the rain, and sense the fear. On the other hand, the townspeople may celebrate their community triumph of rebuilding in the aftermath. In many senses, people become one with the narrative so that it becomes their narrative of that place.

Tim Ingold agrees that human existence is not “fundamentally place-bound . . . but place-binding” (2011, p. 148). The lives of people and places unfold along paths that intertwine, and at that point of meeting they bind in a knot. “The more the lifelines are entwined,” he argues, “the

greater the density of the knot” (p. 149). So we move through the world rather than across it, tying knots of place woven from lines of movement to form a weave of narrative of our landscape. These narratives are formed by stories that contain different meanings for different people, a meaning those people have to discover for themselves. “People do not acquire their knowledge ready-made,” says Ingold, but rather grow into it, through a process of what might be called re-discovery. . . . each story will take you so far, until you come across another that will take you further” (p 152). As we grow into our narrative of place, the better we come to know it in our mind and the greater the depth and clarity of our perception of our environment. “Landscapes of place reflect upon landscapes of the mind,” James M Houston writes. “Land is the palimpsest of human need, desires, meaning, greed and fears” (1978, p. 225). He refers to Paul Tournier’s contention that man has a personal need to live in places because, “All our experiences, emotions and feelings are indissolubly linked in our memories with places” (1978, p. 227). Our relationship with place is not solely a response to the physically tangible, then, but is a holistic relationship that consists of everything one incorporates into person.

Ultimately, all places in the world meet up with each other. “Whatever place we wish to define as ours is inextricably interconnected with every other place,” argues Eric Prieto, associate professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara (2013, p. 179). Any border around the place we might wish to consider our own is highly permeable; that home place is suffused with our relationships with other places and is in fact enriched by those relationships. Thus the sense of our place in the connected world is enriched not only by our exploration of the immediate environment around us, but by a willingness to explore and to look outward into those other places as we experience the ebb and flow of interchange between us and our greater world. These relationships between nature and culture, between people and weather, between language and art, between life and natural environment are expressed in people’s stories. “Because literary texts operate, for the most part, within the hypothetical, metaphorical register of fiction and poetry,” comments Prieto, “they may . . . change the ways their readers view the world around them, making possible new ways of understanding what is actually there and catalysing new ideas about what might be. . . . they help to make possible the emergence and establishment of new kinds of places” (p. 9). The relationship between story and place, then, can be one of revelation and recreation. Stories of place help us understand our relationship with our immediate environment and with the greater world into which we are connected, and so they also reveal those places to us. As people seek to understand and cope with the challenges of place, that may include catastrophe and chaos as well as order and beauty, apocalypse as well as creation, they develop their relationship and responses to their landscape and to their place and so

understand their terroir. Stories and narratives enable resilience and continuity of culture during hard times when they can help restore balance in time of disruption. Stories are not just about people; they are people.

Chapter Two

“Big wind, he waiting there:” Vance Palmer’s cyclones of apocalypse and their power of revelation.

“What tongue does the wind talk? What nationality is a storm?” Tom Fury, lightning rod salesman.

In his short stories based on the 1934 Cape Tribulation cyclone that culminate in his 1947 novel *Cyclone*, Vance Palmer explores the ebb and flow of interchange between people and weather, nature and society, myth and spirituality. In *Cyclone*, Palmer works closely from an historical and environmental background with which he was familiar from his six-month residence, with his wife Nettie, in Cairns and on Green Island during the middle of 1932. Although based on historical people, places and events, some of which remain recognizable today, Palmer’s novel is more than ‘faction’. In seeking to explore the deeper elements and meanings of relationships between those people, nature, and place, rather than just recounting history, Palmer creates a novel unlike any other that he wrote. Although Professor Harry Heseltine dismisses the novel as merely “a slight tale of the North Queensland coast, competent but undistinguished” (*Vance Palmer*, 1970, p. 118), Palmer’s characters in *Cyclone* are motivated by a search for meaning that is deeply related to their tropical place and to their lives there. It is a search even more meaningful today in the light of current concerns with environmental messages.

While Palmer bases *Cyclone* on historic events in early 1930s North Queensland, he deliberately repositions those events in order to reinterpret and rework them, moving the arrival of his fictional cyclone eighteen days beyond the historic date to Easter weekend: a period associated with resurrection and renewal that gives Palmer scope for a number of symbolic implications. Palmer finally completed *Cyclone* in 1947, when he was in his early sixties and many years after the historic events on which it was based actually took place, and the delay may well have been because in attempting to tell the story he constantly had to confront personal tragedy: his good friend Bill Millard died during the 1934 cyclone. During the intervening period between the actual and fictional cyclones, Palmer worked through ideas about scenes and characters for the novel in three short stories: “The Big Wind,” published in late 1932; “Cyclone,” which appeared in March, 1936; and “Tempest,” which was published in September, 1936. In the earliest of these stories, “The Big Wind,” Palmer seems to be sketching out an early draft of the Fay Donolly character: the fearful left-at-home wife made stronger by her cyclone experience. Here that character appears as the pregnant

Mary Shenton who survives child-birth during the cyclone, realizing in the aftermath that she has defeated the monster of fear that has haunted her. "I won't be afraid of wind again. Afraid of anything else either," she declares afterwards. "You just clench your teeth, and at last you come out the other side" (1932, p. 13). The second story, "Cyclone," contains a version of part of the novel's plot in which a boat captain feels duty-bound to take a load of supplies north in the face of an on-coming cyclone. In "Tempest," Palmer is working out his visualization of the cyclone as monster, as 'leviathan,' as well as drafting an early version of the Randall character as the disfigured and embittered pilot Gessler who has an epiphany in the cyclone regarding his self-worth. It is as if the emotions and memories engendered by the tragedy of Millard's loss blocked Palmer from immediately writing the longer work and so he attempted to contextualize those events using short story form in a search for the meaning of the tragedy. Writing it out in this way evidently worked as a form of catharsis for Palmer, for he was ultimately able to complete the larger, more profound novel.

Much of the context associated with the novel is that of the place in which it is set: the North Queensland coastal region around Cairns, where Palmer and his wife Nettie lived for a short while some two years before the events of the novel. Consequently, *Cyclone* is grounded in Palmer's intimate knowledge of, and association with that tropical place, an intimacy of *terroir* apparent in detailed descriptions of local backyards, plants and weather, for example, and in his accounts of characters' largely positive relationships with them. As Deborah Jordan maintains, "his characters represent living people in whom the spirit of place becomes expressive and individualized" (2010, p. 156). However, it is by no means a fixed expression. As Mrs Porter aboard the *Crest of the Wave* during the 1899 Cyclone Mahina realized, cyclones have an impact on place and on one's attitude to it. After surviving her cyclone, Palmer's female protagonist Fay Donolly also realizes that, "She wouldn't be so sure of her own little world again . . . a window had opened up in her mind, giving her a glimpse of the terror and mystery lurking behind the stolid face of things" (Palmer, 1947, p. 194). Yet, while the destructive power of the storm in *Cyclone* may indeed engender terror, the mystery of the storm lies within its power to change and to reveal. As Heseltine observes, the cyclone of Palmer's novel "purges the human conflicts it has both intensified and symbolized" (1970, p. 119), and so it acts as a catalyst for change by revealing mistakes and presenting new futures. These character's lives will never be the same again and, in this way, Palmer's cyclones fulfil the true nature of apocalypse.

The word 'apocalypse' is from the Greek *apokalupsis*, implying an unveiling and realization of future events or meanings: a revelation. As James Berger notes in *After the End*, to be truly apocalyptic an event must "in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what

has been brought to an end.” The apocalypse is not the end in itself, he elaborates, but anticipates, reveals and explains the end (1999, p. 5). An apparently destructive event such as a cyclone can be apocalyptic, then, in the sense that it also reveals and explains. In the event’s aftermath, survivors are offered choices and opportunities to start again, to perceive previously unseen aspects of themselves and so renew their lives. In this way, the incomprehensible can be comprehended; the randomness of violent weather can be given cause. Throughout Queensland literature, the trope of the cyclone appears as both destroyer and re-creator, as an instrument of divine will, of fate or of destiny itself. It appears as an apocalyptic revelation to characters that they are part of the inevitable and uncontrollable cycle of death and birth, of change and of renewal, and Palmer uses the cyclone trope in his stories as catalyst and instrument of apocalypse. From the destruction wreaked by cyclones, revelations emerge in his work: old things are wiped away and new worlds revealed. Palmer knew of the power of cyclones to change people’s lives physically and spiritually through having listened to survivor’s stories; he knew that people had strength to transcend that whirling storm.

Writers and critics Vance and Nettie Palmer experienced tropical life and environment, and heard about the dangers of North Queensland cyclones, while on a prolonged visit to the Cairns area in 1932. They negotiated a permit to set up camp on Green Island, which is a small, forested coral cay surrounded by a lagoon and reef, located about 27 kilometres off-shore from Cairns. Proclaimed a nature reserve under council control in 1906, the island’s only permanent occupant at that time was a ranger/caretaker and his wife. Vance and Nettie remained on the island for some six months through the middle of the year, seeking a peaceful and quiet respite from life in Melbourne. Nettie always appreciated that, “There is a good deal to be said for letting the mind rest in one spot, small enough to hold the affections and, perhaps, to be understood” (1988, p. 484), and so while they sought to have a break here, they also looked forward to developing an understanding of this tropical place while catching up on their reading and their work on respective projects. Nettie was working on a collection of essays that would be published on their return as *Talking it Over* (1932), and Vance was working on a novel and various short stories. They wanted to learn about the tropics as place, rather than fiction in which no one reached coral islands “except by being neatly wrecked on them,” Nettie wrote. Instead, they wanted to discover “something about the mystery of coral reefs, not as scientists but as seekers after the world’s wonders” (1988, p. 527). The only permanent residents on the island other than the ranger, the Palmers liked to give the impression in their letters and articles that they were on a remote coral island within “the immense apparent nothingness of sea and sky” (1988, p. 82), whereas in reality they were only a short boat journey across the water from Cairns, from where tourists and the occasional guest arrived on the supply boat every Sunday. Vance and Nettie also met and socialized with the men from fishing boats and luggers that regularly

dropped anchor at the island, sheltering from bad weather or resting on their journey along the Reef, from whom they heard stories of the sea and storms. The Palmers had never previously been to North Queensland and that part of the Barrier Reef, and so their residence on the island for such a prolonged period was a new and exciting immersion for them into North Queensland culture and place. “I never knew it before,” Nettie wrote to a friend about North Queensland, “but I feel its fascination” (Palmer & Palmer, 1977, p. 72).

Much of that fascination for the Palmers was with the region’s paradisiacal environment. Nettie referred to living on Green Island as being miraculously transported into a “bright green forest” that reminded her of Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1932, p. 9). Nettie felt that to live on such an island was “almost a domestication of Fairyland,” a place, she thought, where “every tree has personality, . . . where every bird is a delight” (1932, p. 13). Vance enhanced the sense of island mystery by observing that they seemed to be living on an island within an island: when the tide receded, it revealed a reef island around them that was “ten times as large, teeming with its own kind of life” (1932, p. 20). Such abundant life and vegetation seemed like Paradise to this pair of city-dwellers. As their camp was on the leeward side of the island facing the shore, their view across the water towards the jungled mountain escarpment behind Cairns seemed as if they were “looking at the originals of ancient engravings of the Garden of Eden,” Nettie wrote (1932, p. 9). Like the Eden under God’s protection, Nettie felt this place too was “a beautiful, safe jungle . . . even more wonderful than the coral reef itself.” There was “a gentleness about it – no thorns, poisonous reptiles, stinging insects. Instead, there are the unafraid birds . . . and the bright, flickering butterflies, all seemingly sure of being in some forest fastness,” she recorded in her journal (1988, p. 82). And, of course, like any Eden, there were no snakes in this brilliantly coloured, naturally lush environment that was so different than anything to which they had been previously exposed.

However, Nettie and Vance were well aware that in these wet tropics the cyclone season returned every year, potentially rendering this apparently safe haven very unsafe indeed. Although they had wisely timed their stay outside of the cyclone season, Nettie was acutely aware of the inherent danger from such weather events. She graphically described a cyclone as an “insane bird with incredible force,” in an echo of Vance’s later description in *Cyclone*, as well as “an unnamed and unnameable giant” that was “like some colossal animal darkly furred with cloud, each ‘blow’ of its paw a hundred miles an hour” (1934, p. 4). In fact, the Palmers had arrived only a few months after a cyclone had crossed Cape York Peninsula from the Gulf of Carpentaria to the west, a little south of Coen, on 18 and 19 January that year. It had then travelled south down the coast, causing major flooding around Tully and Innisfail, where a child had drowned. Nettie noted that such

weather events became landmarks in regional memory; local people still recalled where they had been, she wrote, when previous severe tropical cyclones had struck, “as people who were in Europe remember where they spent the first days in August, 1914” (1934, p. 4). She praised the endurance of the fishermen she and Vance met, with whom they discussed the dangers of working in the vicinity of the Great Barrier Reef during the cyclone season, a necessity because housewives still wanted to buy their fish. There was, the couple were quickly made aware, profound peril lurking beneath the beauty of this paradise. “Every Eden has its serpent,” Vance wrote, “and in the coral islands of the Great Barrier Reef the cyclone provides the chief menace to life – the one thing that mars an existence that would otherwise be idyllic” (1938, p. 4).

During their stay, the Palmers became friends with two men in particular from the local maritime community: Bill Millard, who captained the nine metre fishing and supply ketch *Mossman* on voyages north to Cooktown and south to Palm Island and the Hinchinbrook Channel, and John Demos (also known as Tinos), who was captain of the fishing boat *Quest* that would often fish in the waters around Green Island (Nettie Palmer, 1988, pp. 102-104). Both were experienced seamen. Millard was a former Royal Navy officer who had served in WWI and Demos had sailed the Mediterranean and the North Sea. Vance would often sail with Millard on his supply trips up the coast to Daintree and Bloomfield, and on the return voyage they would usually stop to fish around Low Island. So, when Vance and Nettie left Green Island in November, 1932, it seems fitting that they sailed south in the *Mossman* with their friends Bill Millard and his wife and children, who had decided to coincide the Palmers’ departure with the Millards’ first holiday in years. “What wonderful days ahead!” exulted Nettie (1988, p. 108), as they island-hopped from Fitzroy to Dunk to Hinchinbrook, camping ashore at night, fishing and exploring.

The Palmers so enjoyed their stay on Green Island that, after they returned to Melbourne, they made plans for a return visit to the Reef in the middle of 1933 that would be “something rather funny and uncertain,” Nettie wrote to Frank Dalby Davison (Palmer & Palmer, 1977, p. 82). They planned to put together a group of about thirty people who would be willing to financially contribute to the venture and then between June 21 and July 21 they would sail north from Townsville aboard the *Mossman* with Bill Millard, camping at Dunk, Palm and Green Islands and exploring the Reef (*Newcastle Sun*, 6 June 1933, p. 6). However, according to Nettie, it was “all an experiment, and although it looks watertight there may be wretched leaks” (1977, p. 82). Apparently, some of those leaks could not ultimately be sealed for the expedition appears to have been postponed at the last minute, and the Palmers remained in Melbourne that year. Nevertheless, they always retained fond and “unforgettable” memories of their association with the *Mossman* and Millard, whom Vance would later describe as a “good seaman, good comrade,” a man he considered to be of “uncommon

character and ability” whom people, whether Aboriginal or white Australian, trusted implicitly because “his most careless promise was his bond” (Palmer, 1934, p. 6).

So, the Palmers were understandably devastated to hear the news that a cyclone had struck North Queensland near Cape Tribulation on 12 March, 1934. Destructive winds, along with a nine-metre storm surge, caused widespread damage and the loss of between fifty and sixty lives along with many boats, including Millard and the *Mossman*, as well as John Demos and the *Quest*. The wreckage of the *Mossman* was identified by Tom McDonald, pilot of the only aeroplane in Cairns at the time, who flew along the coast between Cairns and Cooktown after the cyclone to search for survivors of the various boats that had gone missing, landing at various places to identify wreckage and guide survivors to safety (McDonald, 1934). What he did was so helpful, Nettie later wrote, “as to make aviation seem a form of human effort able at last to mitigate, by warning and observation, the persistent peril for those at sea in these cyclone months” (1934, p. 4). Vance apparently agreed, effectively memorialising McDonald as the character Randall in *Cyclone*, given that his wording of Randall’s flight to Cooktown closely follows that of McDonald in places. McDonald subsequently reported that the cyclone had cut a visible swathe of destruction through the jungle of the then lightly-settled Cape Tribulation area, essentially destroying the small villages of Daintree and Bailey’s Creek, now Cow Bay (1934, p. 13). There was also some structural damage and flooding in Mossman and Cairns, and Nettie was indignant that newspaper journalists seemed more concerned about the property damage than the loss of life. She lamented their good friend and seaman Millard with whom they had spent so much time on that “long, lovely trip” down the Reef, whose “courage, his camaraderie, his love of independence, and his enthusiasm for that lean, rich life of picking up a pittance with a small boat” they both remembered so fondly (1988, pp. 128-9). According to Deborah Jordan (2011), Nettie recorded in her diaries that she and Vance often discussed their experiences on Green Island and the Reef with the Millards in the months afterwards. Vance was deeply affected by Bill’s death, she wrote, as he had only recently lost another friend, Katherine Susannah Pritchard’s husband, Jimmy Throssell. Soon Bill’s wife, Lillian, frail and penniless, moved to Melbourne with their two children and stayed for a while with the Palmers, who helped them financially (2011, p. 25). Despite the Edenic memories that Vance and Nettie Palmer retained of their 1932 Green Island sojourn, the island and the Reef were not the same places without their beloved friends and they never returned there.

However, while they may not have returned to North Queensland physically, Vance Palmer would return there in his imagination, fictionalizing events surrounding the 1934 cyclone over a decade later in his novel, *Cyclone* (1947), as well as in two short stories he wrote during the intervening years, “Cyclone” (1936a), and “Tempest” (1936b). Although Palmer does not actually

name the small port in which his protagonist lives in “Cyclone,” and his destination of Sharon River does not appear on any maps, there are various clues as to it being in a tropical region, such as paw-paws, frigate birds, coral reefs and a cyclone season in February. He also refers to Old Woman Island, a rather distinctive name that he probably transplanted from an island (also known as Mudjimba Island) off the Sunshine Coast near Maroochydore. “Tempest” is clearly set in the same estuary port, with similar tropical features such as a cyclone, frigate birds and mangroves, but this time Palmer links the town more closely to Cairns with references to the Barrier Reef and the off-shore meteorological station on Willis Island. Prior to 1936, however, Palmer had touched on the theme of defeating fear of a storm in a short story, “The Big Wind,” that he evidently wrote four years earlier before visiting North Queensland, in which the protagonist and his wife live on Cowrie Island, which is off the Queensland coast near Hamilton Island in the Whitsundays.

In the novel, *Cyclone*, Palmer mingles the drama of the storm with other violent events that occurred while he was in the area in 1932, known as the ‘Battle of Parramatta Park.’ This bloody altercation exploded on Sunday, 17 July, 1932, when approximately one hundred Cairns unemployed who wouldn’t leave their camp at the show-grounds were surrounded and severely beaten by between 1000 to 2000 local vigilantes, encouraged by police and local business owners and armed with iron bars, clubs, and fence posts wrapped in barbed wire. While no fatalities were recorded at the time, some 80 combatants were injured, some badly enough to be hospitalized. Although Palmer fictionalizes actual people and places in *Cyclone*, his models for some of the major characters and settings are thinly disguised. More importantly, Palmer brings the date of the cyclone’s arrival forward some eighteen days to Easter Sunday, which fell at the beginning of April in 1934, for no obvious plot reason. Only the general time of the year would have made a difference to the setting because in the North Queensland wet tropics, there are only two seasons rather than four: the Wet and the Dry. Setting the novel during the Wet obviously allows Palmer to use the increase in humidity and air pressure to emphasise the build-up of tensions in the novel, but if he had only that purpose in mind he could have set it at any time between Christmas and Easter. For that matter, he could have had his fictional cyclone arrive on the same date as the historical one and it would not have made any difference to the novel’s plot. Clearly, Palmer made a deliberate choice to set the novel’s events predominantly on Easter Sunday and that choice will be explored later.

As we’ve already noted, Palmer did not return to the 1934 cyclone events in extended fictional form until many years later, yet *Cyclone* still seethes with tensions and conflicts, meteorological and personal of that period. Palmer’s novel revolves around three men, Brian Donolly, Ross Halliday and Clive Randall, and the developing tension in the relationships between them that are embodied in the on-coming cyclonic storm. Donolly and his wife Fay have rented out

their farm and come to the North Queensland coast with their family to establish, in partnership with Brian's old army friend Halliday, a coastal shipping business that is primarily financed by Randall, another army mate. However, their dreams of developing a thriving shipping business do not work out in the face of Depression-era economic hardship and the loss of their first boat in a fire, leaving them to struggle along with a battered old launch, the *Gannet*. Afraid that the business will fail and leave her family stranded, Donolly's wife Fay becomes increasingly unhappy, remembering their farm as a place where they lived and worked together and where they were economically and socially secure, compared to the overgrown property on the edge of a swamp where they now live. Here in this port, however, their financial and domestic security is at risk and, to make matters worse, Donolly is constantly away from home. With a cyclone approaching the coast, he has decided to sail north with Halliday because no other crew are available, and he and Fay argue over his decision. Fay's state of mind is not improved by her suspicions that Randall is having an affair with Halliday's wife, Bee, nor by the actions of her brother, budding writer Tod Kellaheer. For reasons that she does not understand, he has abruptly abandoned his job aboard the *Gannet* to live in the encampment of unemployed at the town show-grounds, seemingly prepared to risk both his reputation and his physical well-being to stand in solidarity with them in the face of threats of violence from local business people.

Palmer then heightens these tensions between his characters by setting them within the increasing meteorological tension in the atmosphere. Ultimately, the potential damage from human conflicts could be insignificant compared to that from epic, elemental forces of nature that Palmer symbolises within the surrounding environment. Not only does a serpent appear in Fay Donolly's untended and overgrown Eden garden but the very wind also becomes one of the animal-like, mythic beasts of air, land, sea lurking within the landscape. "Big wind, he waiting there, jus' over skyline," a Murray Island man says to Brian Donolly in a bar. "Big wind, he bunch himself up, all ready to spring. I know. Feel 'm in head here, feel 'm in belly, feel 'm in bones" (p. 104). Palmer's townsfolk will need to find strength by which they can combat these beasts and monsters of chaos in order to restore order in their lives and to rebuild their place. "Literature," proposes literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye, "is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling" (*The Stubborn Structure*, 1970, p. 295). In *Cyclone*, Palmer uses the mythical monster Leviathan as a trope for the cyclone, a violent anti-cultural weather event, and for those connotations of danger and fear of the unknown associated with it. In this novel, the myth of the serpent-monster becomes a structural principle of his story-telling: the shape of the natural event becomes that of the misshapen unnatural. "In myth and literature, the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference," argues Susanna Hoffman. "Monsters such as Caliban, Frankenstein,

Grendel, Dracula, refuse to participate in and be part of the civilized order and as such are a threat to it” (2002, p. 128). Every ordered civilization has a monster, a Grendel, a white whale, a vampire, a zombie, a Leviathan, so that people can clearly understand the result of disorder, and they give the names and characteristics of those monsters to nature disasters: volcanoes become dragons, tornados become devils, floods become hungry and devour. When no name seems suitable, they fall back on generic terms of difference such as, ‘freak of nature.’ Just when people think they have imposed order on nature and have it under control, and the boundaries between order and chaos delineated, the monster of disaster and disorder appears to challenge the cultural order and cause society to reassess their hubris. Nor does the monster always show up on schedule, although people try to impose order on it by endeavouring to detect and define the schedule, like Ahab attempting to find the White Whale by tracking his migratory route across the ocean. They install weather radar, seismographs, barometers, ocean buoys, and underwater sensors in efforts to warn of the approach of the monster but, inevitably, it still surprises them.

In myth, literature and science, the monster is out there at the limit of knowledge and resists detection and capture. By its very nature, it is unpredictable and its shape shifts, and there lies its true threat to society. We want to know it, but it does not want to know us. We may think it gone, but it is only sleeping and will always return. Despite all our technology and science, the natural disaster remains the monster that threatens civilization’s claim to dominion over nature and the superiority of order and in the mythic construct, the monster is there for a reason: in challenging order with chaos, it forces people to constantly re-think the motivation and construct of that order. Even by merely threatening to carry out an apocalypse in the old world, the monster offers different and enticing ways of perceiving the new one. That previously ordered society might never be the same again. Beauty could be the result of encountering the beast.

In *Cyclone*, Fay Donolly, as unsettled as the townspeople and the weather, is locked in a mental struggle with the monster of chaos that threatens the order of her life and family. “You get screwed up in this wet season, feel as if some particular person or thing is twitching at your nerves” (1947, p. 8), she anguishes. Although she briefly visualizes the wind as a swooping sea eagle waiting to strike them, the ultimate threat of chaos takes the form in her mind of the great serpentine sea-beast, Leviathan. What should have been a new Eden for the family is now under threat from various sources: the success of her husband Brian’s business venture with a charter boat for which they have sacrificed their former home and security is in doubt; the marriage of one of the business partners could be failing; and her brother cannot find his direction in life. “So many ghosts are set walking,” she senses, “by the threats of the wind,” and for her these threats persist through this Easter weekend. The house and its environs are tropes of her mental condition: the wind “nags” at

loose fittings, working iron sheets free from nails, and it seems to Fay as if the ramshackle house is being “worried to pieces” (p. 2). The house faces a small swamp and consequently fevers are constantly attacking the children. The yard has become a jungled wasteland in which outhouses are rotting, where rampant vegetation hides potential hazards of rusting tin and fencing and where there is, she senses, “a touch of something sinister in that fecundity of the warm water-logged earth. You could almost feel in the thrusting pressure against anything that had been built by human hands the assertion of a blind, destructive will” (p. 13).

This chaos has spread out into the surrounding town, which has become a “stew of quarrels, small and big” (pp. 51-2) as it has been invaded by the unemployed who are waiting for the cane-cutting and fishing seasons to begin in which they will find work. Much to the angst of the town’s tourism-conscious business people, they have set up camp at the showgrounds and refused to move on, and now there is “something depressed and eruptive in the mood of the town, a festering of old feuds . . . Everywhere violence or threats of violence” (pp. 51-2). To Fay, it seems that “in these wet months, as if something was nagging at people, wearing their nerves to a frazzle, making them explode at a touch” (p. 19). This potential Eden has become a place of chaos in which she struggles to maintain order and to protect her family, including her brother, Tod, for whom this place has also become “a battlefield, the arena for a great conflict, a testing ground for himself” (p. 82). Her husband, Brian, realizes that, “Deep down, he had a feeling that beyond the circle of light that ringed them something was waiting that would test their strength and endurance to the limit” (p. 135). That ‘something’ is the stalking cyclone.

This chaos and conflict is symbolized by serpents large and small that invade Fay’s deteriorating paradise. First the python invades the garden and then that serpentine sea-monster, Leviathan, invades her mind from within the storm. When the python appears early in the novel, Brian estimates that the seven-metre reptile must have seemed like a dragon as menacing as any in her picture-books to their diminutive and terrified daughter who had stepped on it. For Fay, the python must pay the ultimate price for threatening her children and the family’s poultry, and insists that Brian execute it. Then, concerned by a folk legend that the snake will not actually die until sunset, even though it has been rendered headless, she also insists that Brian bury it immediately, declaring, “I loathe . . . all the slimy growths that come out of this jungle” (p. 17). However, even after the snake’s burial, “This one still had power to writhe through her thoughts” (p. 110). Yet they had come here from a farm where dispatching snakes was so common for Fay they were “forgotten before her eyes closed in sleep” (p. 110). Thinking it over, she realizes that her uncharacteristic reactions are indications of deeper issues for her. She is associating the snake in her Eden with the oppressing disorder and decay that is beginning to encroach on her life and corrupt her faith in her

family. She feels she is losing control of her relationship with her husband, that they are drifting apart, and that their ordered lives are being pushed apart like the spouting being pushed from the roof by the luxuriantly invading grenadilla vine. Conscious that these feelings of fear and doubt have only recently begun to haunt her, Fay wonders if this might be because she has begun to doubt her inner security in her life with Brian. Perhaps, she muses, she is subconsciously using her reaction to the snake as an attempt to influence Brian to also hate this place as justification for leaving it (p. 111). So, when Brian does ultimately decide to accompany his friend Halliday north in the *Gannet* into the mouth of the cyclone beast, it is with Leviathan that Fay does battle in her mind in order to save her husband.

As the cyclone rages around her home, Fay envisions it as the enormous sea-monster Leviathan, mortally wounded like the python in her garden, rearing its scaly bulk “dripping with weed and wrack, from the waste of waters,” thrashing and convulsing in a death agony during which lightning sparks from its forked tongue as it sweeps its tail “over cays and coral reefs, sending the tides roaring up little rivers and swamping the mangrove beaches” (p. 159). This is the snake resurrected, “risen again in anger,” so strong this time that Fay feels it cannot be destroyed, “for he was in league with the dark forces behind the deceptive appearance of things”(p. 159), always waiting to “raise his dragon head and turn the known world to an evil waste”(p. 160). John Milton wrote of the leviathan in *Paradise Lost* that is,

Hugest of living creatures, on the deep
 Stretched like a promontory, sleeps or swims,
 And seems a moving land, and at his gills
 Draws in, and at his trunk spouts out, a sea” (VII, pp. 412-6).

In selecting Milton’s lines as the epigraph for *Moby Dick*, and then constantly using the term ‘leviathan’ throughout the work in connection with whales, Herman Melville firmly associated the name with whales in the modern literary mind. However, Palmer’s use of ‘Leviathan’ in *Cyclone* clearly refers to the word’s earlier mythical and Biblical origins as the name for the more serpentine and terrifying great sea-beast of chaos. When the Biblical psalmist praises the strength of God who “brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces” (Ps. 74.14), he is referring to a superior deity who has the power to defeat the mythical Canaanite monster Litanu, or Lotan, a seven-headed chaos beast linked with the sea. “Cosmologically, the leviathan is the element of chaos within creation,” comments Northrop Frye, (1982, p. 190), and the Jehovah of the Old Testament wants to remind people that He has greater power with which He has asserted order over that chaos. When He finally speaks from out of the whirlwind to the despairing and afflicted Job, God reminds him of His superior power in a series of rhetorical questions about the greatest beast that lives in the seas. “Canst thou draw out

leviathan with an hook? Or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? . . . Wilt thou play with him as with a bird? Or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens?" God asks, simultaneously implying that Job cannot do such things that God could if He wished (Job 41: 1, 5). After all, He reminds Job, "None is so fierce that dare stir him [leviathan] up; who then is able to stand before me?" (Job 41.10). No-one, of course, and so it will be God who one day restores order by defeating Leviathan, who is being used here as a trope for the powers of evil, when, "In that day the lord with his sore and great and strong sword shall punish leviathan . . . that crooked serpent . . . the dragon that is in the sea" (Isaiah. 27.1). As powerful as Leviathan may seem, then, it is possible to defeat the beast, as Fay discovers.

Like the Leviathan of the Bible, Palmer's version is a serpent-beast of the sea. Here he brings three serpents together: the literal, the psychological and the mythical. In Fay's mind, the snake that she ordered buried, before it had time to die in the time allotted to it according to folklore, has risen from the dead transformed into the immortal Leviathan "in league with the dark forces" (p. 159). It rises angry from out of the familiar landscape of backyards and coral seas under which it perpetually lurks, ready to lay waste to everything. Yet, Fay finds the inner strength with which to escape the serpent in her dream and see a vision of an upturned boat with two figures clinging to it, from which she wakes in time to save her daughter. Consequently, she re-discovers that woman who previously "took hold of herself in moments of crisis" (p. 175), and she is able to re-establish the control over her house and the children that she previously felt so unable to enact. She persuades Randall to take his plane up to find the men, thus saving her husband's life, all the while maintaining the strength of will to hold firmly in her mind the protective image of the boat securely tied up at a safe mooring.

Like Fay, other characters in *Cyclone* survive the storm within relationships in which life itself, though blind and battered, is "yet moving to some pulse in its secret core" (p. 189). They have to make choices about those relationships and, in many ways, the cyclone reveals to them their options. It is only when Donolly finally relies on his intuition and sense of portent and chooses to leave behind his confrontation with Halliday, for example, that he can marshal his energies to survive the cyclone. Up until now, he has chosen not to recognize the change in Fay's circumstances: that she now feels more responsible because she is concerned about the children's future. He does not want to admit, either, that his business relationship with Halliday has now reached a crisis point and that he may have to accept defeat. Thus while part of Donolly recognises the seriousness of their current situation, he stubbornly keeps Halliday and their business afloat, partly out of loyalty to his friend but partly out of loyalty to his dream of a life without the pressures of worry about the future. In doing so, Donolly has become Ishmael to Halliday's Ahab as they both

chase the elusive White Whale of their respective dreams. It will only be Halliday's death in the cyclone that finally frees Donolly to move on, as Ahab's death freed Ishmael.

Northrop Frye (1982) argues that there are mythic foundations to the themes of stories, by which he means stories typically have narrative structures based on the link between personalities and events. The arranging or sequencing of that structure, the narrative principle on which it is based, Frye terms the *mythos* and when Donolly, presumed dead, is eventually cast ashore alive onto a remote beach from the depths of the sea like Jonah regurgitated from his leviathan, Palmer is writing his own version of a traditional *mythos*. Here is the hero returning alive, having slain the beast, when all thought him surely dead. He is Theseus returning after slaying the Minotaur in a subterranean labyrinth. More significantly, he is Perseus rescuing the chained Andromeda by slaying the sea-monster, Cetus, which has been threatening her, for within this particular *mythos* is an etymological chain of connection. The Greek word *ketos*, or Latin *cetus*, denotes a large fish or whale, from which is derived the English word *cetacean*. Although the modern version of the story of Jonah in the Bible usually links him with a whale, the more accurate translation of the original Hebrew term *dag gadol* is the less specific 'great fish'. The Greek translation of that Hebrew term is *cetus*, the very name of that sea monster of the Perseus myth. However, Jonah's story does not end with him being swallowed by the leviathan because, after much pleading with God, Jonah is regurgitated onto the beach a changed man. Later in the Bible, Jesus links the *mythos* of Jonah to that of his own when, upon being asked by the priests for a sign, Jesus replies that there will be only one sign: as Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the whale, so he would be "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12.40). He leaves his audience to supply their own end to what would have been a familiar story to this group of scripture scholars. They would have known that Jonah returns alive from his sojourn beneath the sea, and so Jesus was implying that he, too, would return from his journey beneath the earth. As in the returning hero *mythos*, Jesus would defeat the monster of Death in the Underworld and emerge victorious. The day that celebrates this event on the Christian calendar is Easter Sunday and it is on Easter Sunday that Palmer has Donolly, having been presumed dead, found alive.

Palmer is writing in *Cyclone* about the great mythic themes of the struggle of good against evil, of life against death, of the fight with great leviathans from which it is possible to emerge triumphant. Brian and Fay Donolly's story is one of death and resurrection, of destruction and renewal. While his wife Fay is doing battle with the sea beast Leviathan in her mind, Brian is physically struggling with the sea that threatens to destroy him. When, like Jonah, he is thrown into the sea, he feels "freed from an intolerable burden" and now better able to fight the forces that threaten to overwhelm him with "a will to extract the last effort from the sources of life buried in

him, to go on and on and not be destroyed” (Palmer, 1947, p. 147). He fights in a dark, hellish place where the known world has dissolved and time has ceased to exist, where “demon voices, some wailing, some triumphant, broke loose, bringing images of devils riding and hounds giving tongue” (p. 142), where “demon powers” are at war, “shouting in voices that shook the heart with awe”(p. 144). To defeat these demonic figures of darkness, he summons images of light in a home where there is a “warm radiance flooding through his whole being” as his family gathers in support (p. 145). Donolly is not destroyed; although swallowed by the sea, he is ultimately regurgitated onto the beach as a figure typifying “life itself . . . moving to some pulse in its secret core” (p. 189).

Fay Donolly also defeats her Leviathan of chaos, the beast of doubt and fear that has threatened to destroy her life with her family. She prevails and is able to defeat her personal apocalyptic beast: her cry at the end of her vision awakens her in time to save her daughter from possible harm when part of the roof blows off. Involved in protecting her family, Fay’s “small familiar world” flows back to her and as her vision of the storm fades, the cyclone loses its hold on her and its power wanes until it is “merely a natural force, something she could withstand” (p. 161). In fact, Fay not only survives her cyclone experience, she transcends it. As she sees behind and beyond the mundane rituals of everyday life to the “terror and the mystery lurking behind the stolid face of things,” she experiences an epiphany that almost enables her to gain access to a new dimension of understanding (p. 194). This apocalyptic cyclone has revealed to her aspects of herself that she had forgotten, and she will never again be the person she was prior to its arrival. Fay’s insights into the spiritual aspects of her cyclone experience reveals Palmer’s interest in developing deeper emotional and psychic responses of his characters. Rather than merely recounting how Fay resolves her visions, Palmer uses her as a vehicle for something more unformed, more suggestive: a concept of the realm of nature as part of the unconscious, a concept inclusive of death and destruction as well as the will to live. Like Mary Shenton in his short story, “The Big Wind,” Fay will not be afraid of the wind again. Her mental eyes have been opened, and now she knows there is both “terror and mystery lurking behind the stolid face of things” (p. 194). Leviathan may still be out there, waiting, but Fay is now forewarned and prepared.

As if to emphasise his point, Palmer actually indulges in at least two other resurrections in *Cyclone* of minor historical character models who died during the 1934 storm. In the novel, two girls named Mara and Jessie board the *Gannet* and ask to sail with Halliday and Donolly. Disturbed by the on-coming storm, “some secret fear seemed to be working in them, as if the strange omens in sea and sky had touched their imaginations and conjured up terrors new to their experience” (p. 132), and they have decided to leave their uncle’s boat. Despite the girl’s fears, Halliday and Donolly return them to the lugger, but it sinks during the cyclone. These two young women are fictionalized

versions of Annie and Adelaide Pitt, who with a number of others were drowned while attempting to swim ashore during the historical cyclone from the foundering *Mildred*, but in Palmer's story they are found alive after being washed up on a beach like Donolly.

As well as Fay Donolly, other characters in *Cyclone* survive the storm of chaos to have the opportunity to restore their lives, for in many ways the cyclone reveals to them other options. Tod defeats his monster of uncertainty and in the aftermath of the storm is "uplifted by a sense of having shaped something" (p. 195), as he senses that his life will have future direction. In the storm's wake, Tod comes to realize that a potential allegory made up of all the "teeming images that had filled his mind during the storm" has taken shape in his head, if only he can find the right words (p. 195). His cyclone experience has in the end revealed a possible future for his dream of being a writer. The pilot, Randall, is also offered new opportunity. Previously distracted from the moral path by his affair with Halliday's wife, Bee, he takes off in search of the *Gannet*, aware that something is restored in him after so much recent moral conflict and that he is in charge of himself again.

Not only individuals emerge from the storm renewed, but so also does the port as a whole. "The spectre of the monster as an 'outsider' enemy gives people the cause and symbol to unify, as disaster victims characteristically do," Hoffman argues (p. 130). Before the cyclone, people there are argumentative and lethargic. Having forgotten what it means to care for their fellow man, they are even ready to evict the unemployed by force. In the aftermath of the storm, however, the sense of lurking evil in the town has been dissipated, and a calm now settles over a place that was ready to self-destruct, "as though with the passing of the storm some conflict had been resolved, some cord of tension relaxed" (p. 190). The streets of the town have been baptized by the rain and appear cleansed and newly washed. There is a new-found sense of community optimism, support and co-operation as streets are cleared and damage repaired, and there is economic opportunity as people are employed as the cane harvest begins and fishing boats put out to sea. This apocalyptic cyclone has revealed to them that the source of that strength by which they can survive such catastrophes can lie within themselves but, just as importantly, it can also lie within the strength of family and community. As the cyclone moves on and a new week dawns, the town itself, as well as the people in it, have been resurrected into a new life.

Cyclone reads as a thoughtful, tightly constructed and controlled work, with themes of Edenic fall and recovery, of mythic chaos monsters that challenge order, and of apocalypse and revelation, of death and resurrection, and these are evidently themes upon which Palmer had been reflecting for some time. Although there was a gap between when the historic events occurred between 1932 and 1934, and when Palmer began writing *Cyclone* in 1945, an examination of plot and character elements in three of his earlier short stories reveals that Palmer was apparently

thinking about and experimenting with some of the themes, situations and characters in the novel for some time prior to its publication. In these stories, Palmer's major characters also experience revelations about their lives during cyclonic events.

Much like his novel, Palmer's short story "Cyclone" begins with dreams of shipwreck and omens of bad weather, feelings of dread and of "terrors lurking on the edge of the skyline" (p. 30). In this story, however, roles are reversed: the dreamer of disaster is the male protagonist, Harry Shirlow, who like Fay Donolly and Gessler in "Tempest" is a character with a sixth sense, "a capacity for seeing things before they happened, hearing the wind before it came" (p. 31). Like Brian Donolly, Harry's charter boat business has fallen on hard times and he and Flora are struggling to make ends meet. Harry suspects that his occasional crewman Gourlay is trying to seduce his wife, and this is the serpent in this particular Eden that rears "its ugly head, looking at him with snaky, insinuating eyes" (p. 30). As in his other stories, Palmer uses the weather as a mirror for tension: the February morning is "close," the stillness "ominous," and there is "a feeling of ugly passions stored up in the smothering earth and windless air" (p. 30). When, despite his own misgivings, Shirlow takes Gourlay with him up the coast on his boat, their journey into the storm descends into a struggle for survival. Here, too, something beast-like lurks just out of sight beyond the borders as the sea moves "as if swayed by some tide beyond the world's far edge," and Shirlow hears a "whistle of myriad wings" as the storm arrives "with a roar and a leap" (p. 31). Like Halliday and Donolly, these men attempt to seek shelter but their boat is overwhelmed, and they are washed overboard as it sinks. As Shirlow, like Donolly, fights 'demons of the air' to stay alive, he has an epiphany that he has been paralysed by fear of the future. "I'm free now at last," he realizes. "It was the fear of what was ahead that paralysed me" (p. 31). The "intolerable burden" from which Donolly is freed when the *Gannet* sinks, however, is rather more simplistic: he is merely freed from the stress of keeping the boat above water by strength of will. The conclusion of the short story is remarkably similar to the novel: his boat is wrecked but Shirlow survives alone to be reunited with his wife; the cyclone ravages the area north of Cairns while the town is largely unscathed; a lugger is lost with its crew. Shirlow learns a lesson that he should have trusted his wife and, as this boat was insured, can assure her that, "We'll be able to start again" (p. 31). This cyclone apocalypse, like that of the novel, cleanses the protagonists' world of evil and reveals their new earth.

Palmer was also thinking about chaos monsters stalking society's boundaries in his short story "Tempest," in which people feel "something of terror in the thought of that wild thing moving across the sea-wastes beyond the still horizon" (p. 30). In this story the pilot protagonist, Gessler, a more complex character than his *Cyclone* counterpart, Randall, is scarred and blind in

one eye as a result of a plane crash during the previous cyclone to have struck the town. Much like Tom Fury, the lightning-rod salesman in Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1969), Gessler is intimately sensitive to changes in the weather. Like Gessler, Fury feels a storm approaching that "like a great beast with terrible teeth could not be denied" (p. 5) and, as a result of their violent encounters, Fury and Gessler are marked harbingers of storms, warning heedless people of their approach.

Unable to reconcile with Gessler's injuries, his former lover Claire has left him to marry the womanizing Harry Monaghan, captain of the trading ship *Kestrel*. Monaghan has "always had the devil's own luck" (1936b, p. 30), and Gessler suspects temptation may have lured him away up the coast. Still feeling an obligation to Claire, he agrees to search for Monaghan, who has not returned in the face of the oncoming storm, but once in the air he begins to doubt free will as the impression grows within him he's facing some appointment with destiny. Eventually discovering Monaghan with another woman, Gessler becomes mentally blinded by rage and a desire for revenge and he fails to heed his interior weather warnings as he recklessly takes off into the storm to tell Claire. As the storm's increasing power threatens his control of the plane, Gessler experiences an epiphany that in succumbing to violent emotion he has risked being subsumed into the raging storm, into "this idiot leviathan from the outer spaces that had turned earth and air into a meaningless welter of sound and fury," but this is not who he really is. Instead, Gessler realizes that he must resist being tempted into a vengeful darkness and so he prays for light, which duly streams down from above to transfigure him. Whether Gessler survives or not, he has found his true destiny in "knowing more deeply what had been saved from destruction" (p. 31). Within the apocalypse, he has found revelation.

The only prototype within this trio of cyclone stories for the character of Fay Donolly is in the character of Mary Shenton in Palmer's 1932 story "The Big Wind", published after his return from Green Island. Although she does not appear in person until nearly the end of the story, when even then she speaks only a few words, Mary's unseen presence dominates the entire story. It is because of her impending childbirth as a cyclone approaches Cowrie Island, on which she and her husband live, that he has to sail to the mainland in their small boat to bring back the doctor. Like the later characters of Gessler and Shirlow, her husband has ignored all natural warning signs that a storm is imminent, such as frigate birds, heavy surf, and windless air, and is now suffering fear and guilt for perhaps leaving his voyage too late, even for persuading Mary to live on the island in the first place. Yet, he reflects, they had known the dangers: he and the courageous Mary had heard the stories of the previous 'big wind' that had uprooted trees and thrown water-tanks through the air. Now, Shenton has had to leave her there while he makes a frantic journey across the

intervening stretch of water to find the doctor. Palmer uses the tropical setting to build tension: the heat is oppressive, the still air hangs “heavy and dead,” and the “very trees seemed to have something ominous in their stillness” (p. 12).

As the cyclone overtakes them on their return journey, Shenton hears the shriek of the monster and begins to “personify the hidden terror that lurked behind the racing clouds” (p. 12). Palmer uses animal imagery to build that sense of fear of the non-human: the wind leaps and roars, a “hurtling force, bent on his destruction” (p. 12). It is a “demonic tumult in the sky” equivalent to others about which they have heard and of which Mary has been afraid (p. 13). Having taken shelter on an island as the storm passes over them, the two men reach Cowrie Island the next morning, only to discover that the baby was born during the night without difficulty: Mary has faced her fears and emerged triumphant. “I won’t be afraid of wind again,” she declares defiantly. “Afraid of anything else, either” (p. 13). As it will reveal to Brian Donolly in *Cyclone*, this apocalypse reveals to Shenton the folly of hubris; he is a humbler man now who will be more confident in his wife’s strength and more receptive to her needs. As a result of her experience, Mary will no longer be afraid of the monster. She has faced her inner fears and discovered new strength that has enabled her to bring new life into the world. For both she and her husband, this is a genesis as well as a revelation.

“What tongue does the wind talk?” asks Tom Fury, posing a series of questions like those of God to Job. “What nationality is a storm? What country do rains come from?” (p. 7). Like the lightning-rod salesman, Vance Palmer’s characters in his group of inter-connected cyclone stories sense and experience the mystery as well as the terror of these apocalyptic weather events, for the impact of these spiralling storms is more than that of a material disaster. These cyclones act as a revelation of things to come, a catalyst for change; they lay bare the inadequacies of lives and reveal opportunities to overcome, to move forward into the future. As a result of their experiences, Palmer’s characters experience epiphanies that reveal their lives have been changed. While these are storms with the power to destroy, they can also create opportunities to rebuild new lives, new worlds. In writing *Cyclone*, Vance Palmer sought to understand and cope in his imagination with the challenges of a North Queensland place that now included memories of catastrophe and chaos, as well as paradise and peace. He developed in his novel a response and relationship to that place and so he revealed an understanding of that *terroir*, for he wrote not only of tragedy but also of resilience and continuity of community during hard times. He wrote of a search to restore balance in time of disruption, of a search for meaning. He wrote of revelation.

Chapter Three

“Touching the edges of cyclones”: Thea Astley’s cyclones of revelation

“Disaster comes out of the most sheltered places.” Thea Astley.

Throughout Queensland literature, the cyclone appears as an apocalypse that is both destroyer and re-creator, a revelation of new order from the meaninglessness of chaos. In perceiving that revelation, these paradoxes of destruction and re-creation can be comprehended, sometimes on a deeply personal level. There is a relationship between the personal and the elemental, that the cyclone is within as well as without, that we are all part of a swirling, spiralling cyclonic universe that embraces the physical and the personal landscape (as discussed further in Chapter 5). This was the universe of Thea Astley, for whom cyclones were more than weather events. In *The Acolyte* (1985), she describes the novel’s protagonist and narrator, Paul Vesper as, “always touching on the edges of cyclones” (p. 119), and in a 1991 interview with lecturer and literary critic Ray Willbanks she agreed that this applied to a number of her characters. After all, “Just being alive is like living on the edge,” she declared, adding that her friend Patrick White had said this, not only in his 1973 novel, *The Eye of the Storm*, but in all his books, in which White had “taught us to look at the essence of things” (p. 28). When Willbanks suggested that she tended to bring her characters out of the eye of their storms to that very edge, Astley agreed, then elaborated further by drawing another comparison with Patrick White. While he was taking his characters into the eye, she argued, “I think mine have been misguidedly trying to get right away, out of the entire ambient of the cyclone and, of course, that is not possible, not for any human. The minute you are born you are put into this situation” (p. 30). Astley considered that like her characters we are all in “this situation,” all in the cyclone together. In order to survive that kind of intense, life-encompassing experience, she proposed, humanity needed to have a common spiritual conscience that would connect everyone. There is “an unseeable umbilical cord linking all humans,” she declared, and so instead of trying to go it alone, we should be reaching out to each other and reasserting commonality from which to gather strength as a community and develop a spiritual conscience: “You find out about yourself,” she advises, “by talking to others” (p. 30).

Astley’s characters ignore this connectivity at their peril. The symbolic storm that encloses them can divide them, biographer and literary critic Professor Brian Matthews argues, “by its very existence and psychologically oppressing nature” (2008, p. 43), as they endeavour to establish their

position and their balance in a universe that often seems to make little sense. In *Girl With a Monkey* (1958), for example, trapped within her storm's eye for twenty-four hours, Elsie retreats to her own inner island where she attempts to distance herself as she watches the storm of Harry's anarchic love approaching her. However, it is not a storm she can avoid, and she fails to control the emotional cyclone that whirls into chaos around her. Vinnie Lalor in *Descant for Gossips* (1960) shares with Elsie a sense of being on the edge of things and an intense consciousness of self, of being an island in the sea of humanity. Vinny, Moller and Helen all shelter on this island as a storm of malice, rumour, carelessness and squalor masses around them, encircling and eventually destroying them. George Brewster, *The Well Dressed Explorer* (1962) himself, can be seen as a cyclone, laying spiritual and psychological waste to the lives of others around him and, although he never sees it, even to his own life. His is the all-consuming insatiability of the cyclonic storm that grows larger until it collapses in on itself. In *A Kindness Cup* (1974), Dorahy the schoolteacher becomes caught up in his own personal cyclone as he becomes obsessed by his mission to finally reveal the truth about the massacre of Aborigines at Mandarana, a quest that had previously failed at the official enquiry that had exonerated whites for black deaths. Returning to a local reunion many years later, Dorahy's obsession drives him on despite the trail of destruction in its wake. His revealed truth raises no cup of kindness for time long ago but instead wreaks havoc after which no-one's lives will be the same again.

Trapped within their whirling personal storms in Astley's Hardy-esque vision of an uncaring Nature that defeats efforts to escape one's fate, Astley's characters often seem to be waiting for some revelation that will provide the key to their predicament and enable them to find something with which to fill an empty life. As D. H. Lawrence observes in *Kangaroo*, "You can't face emptiness long. You have to come back and do something to keep from being frightened at your own emptiness and everything else's emptiness. It may be empty. But it's wicked, and it'll kill you if it can. Something comes out of the emptiness to kill you" (1994, p. 204). As Vance Palmer's character Fay Donolly perceived, there is danger in paradise and, as Australian literature lecturer and author Paul Genoni argues, "One can sense – quite powerfully – the spectre of the uncanny in Astley's struggle to come to terms with the danger inherent in Australian space. The uncanny experience . . . both reality and nightmare, is simultaneously an expression of the sublime and an invitation to terror" (2007, p. 40). In three of Astley's novels, *It's Raining in Mango* (1987), *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (1996), and in particular *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968), the uncanny experience that is both reality and nightmare is that of the tropical cyclone. For Astley, this elemental force symbolises the danger that can come out of emptiness, whether personal or

geographic, and so is an invitation to terror while at the same time an expression of the imaginary sublime.

In *It's Raining in Mango*, a cyclone makes a brief appearance as an instrument of judgement that destroys the Reeftown bordello, along with sixteen year-old runaway Nadine Laffey, who has abandoned her home and her baby in a selfish attempt at independence. Yet, in the middle of their terror while the cyclone wreaks retribution on the women, there is a moment of the imaginary sublime. As the rapidly rising storm surge washes the building, the owner and the three working girls out to sea, one of them is still playing the piano, Sylvia's hands "never more relaxed as they caressed the keyboard and her voice persisted against everything: 'Oh, away,' she sang, 'I'm bound to go, cross the wide Missouri' " (p. 63). Astley's dark sense of humour mitigates a terrible tragedy: four people are about to perish. Yet at least one of those people, Sylvia, demonstrates that while she will accept this judgement by the elements, it will be on her own terms: the sublime experience of music. She may be crossing the river, but it is through the medium of music that her voice persists "against everything." While it may demand her life, the cyclone has also revealed a way in which Sylvia can accept that death.

In *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (1996), the destruction of the Aboriginal mission at Hull River in 1918 by a severe tropical cyclone precipitates the forced transfer of those people to Doebin Island (Astley's fictional name for Palm Island) which, in the book and historically, subsequently became a dumping ground for sick or recalcitrant Aboriginal people and Torres Strait islanders. Astley maintains the connection between the violence of place and weather when another cyclone, with "water that batters and batters in one monstrous waterfall" (p. 40), precedes the tightly-wound Superintendent Brodie's murderous rampage, a rampage that reverberates through the lives and future generations of the characters. As they attempt to contextualise those violent events, they are constantly touched by the edge of the cyclone that continues to fill the space of their lives. "You can't hide from the wind," the young Manny Cooktown knowingly predicts, "You close doors on the big wind it get angry, shake your bones, your house bones, body bones, little sticks it think, it knows little people sticks. Flesh fly away like grass in big wind" (p. 2). These cyclones are not just catalysts for events but metaphors of the destruction and displacement that typifies the nature of life on an island where physical and psychological discontent and violence becomes rife.

Astley's cruise ship passengers in *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968) also struggle with the dangers of inner space and outer violent weather when they are marooned on a Pacific island by a cyclone over a period of 48 hours. Subsequently, some experience revelation but for others their experience is a destructive apocalypse. The only Astley novel in which a cyclone plays a central,

pivotal role, this is one of the most profound examples of the cyclone trope in Queensland literature. Yet the book has been critically dismissed because of its bleak perception of life. According to Astley's biographer, Karen Lamb, her publisher's London representative was "aghast at the awfulness of the new Thea Astley [novel]" because "her view of personality is so anarchistic" (2015, p. 195), and one publisher's reader deemed that it was "a study in unhappiness and frustration," as well as being depressing and unlikeable (p. 191). Even Lamb considers it the "book by Astley that ought not to have been published," yet her only justification for this broad condemnation seems to be that, like others of her books, it once again placed doomed marriage and dismal partnerships "centre stage" (p. 191). Lamb and the critics before her miss the point. It is what emerges from such despair that is important in this work, in which her characters struggle to find their way within a cyclonic universe that strips away personal layers as well as the roofs overhead to reveal that which is hidden. Her use of this trope in *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, then, is particularly significant.

Astley once said that, "literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal. . . . the parish is the heart of the world" (1976 pp. 255, 257), and the book's title characterises this group of passengers as a domestic community. Her group is not a 'boatload' in the sense of a full ship, but rather a 'boat load,' as in a load or cargo that is being transported by boat. Nor is this a cargo of 'home-folk,' as in people from the same hometown, but 'home folk' as in people from homes. In other words, this is an abandoned cargo of people from homes in parishes consisting of suburbs and country towns. Stevenson is the only one of the group that lives on the island, and none of them is indigenous to it. In effect, they form a separate, singular, out-of-place community of average Australian townspeople on this island. In "The Idiot Question," Astley proposed that such communities were actually universal, "that there must also be Upper Mongolian and North Vietnamese Mrs Everages and Sandy Stones. There have to be" (1970 p. 5). Universal communities, however, also mean universal issues. Everyone, Astley perceived, has to face their own home truths and so, like many of the characters in other Queensland novels featuring cyclones, those in *A Boat Load of Home Folk* must face the ineludible cyclone along with its judgements, penalties and revelations. As the storm strips away the layers of the island's physical structures, it also strips away the layers of Astley's characters to reveal the loneliness, shallowness, absurdity, and unhappiness of their flawed humanity. Some do not survive such an exposure; others emerge changed by it.

In characteristic Astley style, this disaster comes on these 'home folk' unexpectedly. After all, "Disaster comes out of the most sheltered places," she commented to Willbanks, revealing her awareness of the "sudden disruption in people's lives, the shock one gets when a situation he's

taken for granted does a somersault and he is confronting the other side of it”(2008, p. 32). The way to survive these disruptions, Astley theorised, was to be kind and connected. She considered that kindness is “probably what matters more than anything in the world” (p. 35), and that kindness and talking to each other was what connected mankind, helping us to deal with situations. “If you start looking for other people, discovering how they feel,” she said, “you’ll find out so much about yourself in the process that you won’t believe it. . . . you find out about yourself by talking to others” (p. 30). However, these are traits that few of her self-centred group of cruise passengers possess. In fact, with typical Astley irony, most of them exemplify her argument about community in their efforts to forsake it, even though it is when they venture out alone into the chaos of the storm that they are in most danger. Instead of recognizing their community, they remain, as Matthews suggests, “islands of intense self-consciousness seeking, in assertive, almost desperate avowals of identity, bastions against encroaching chaos” (2008, p. 43). There are no heroes in this disaster: just flawed and mortal characters trying to survive by guarding their ‘self,’ their essence of individual identity, against further damage. Even in the face of punishing opposition, Matthews contends, Astley’s characters are convinced that amidst all the failure, evil intent and sordidness surrounding them, there is “some last, lucent distillation of the human spirit whose integrity is worth preserving against the coming storm” (p. 53). In fact, he maintains, Astley “experiments both with the kind of individual and the nature of the personal stance that, together, will be most capable of enduring life in the eye of the storm” (p. 46).

Of all the characters in *Boat Load*, it is the island’s agent Stevenson who experiences the epiphany that reveals to him that distilled essence of his human spirit within which he finds his integrity. A man “of direct eye and unused by nature to practising duplicity” (p. 71), Stevenson finds that after seven years on the island he is practising that very art with Marie Latimer. When his wife, Holly, discovers the liaison, she leaves him and returns to Australia with their daughter and son, Timmy, who is sent to boarding school. However, Stevenson finds only temporary sexual fulfilment with Marie, who did not “need men except when the singing of her body became so high and clear it could not be ignored” (p. 72). She is merely using Stevenson and he knows it, and his deep unhappiness manifests itself in a heart attack and chronic internal pain that he seeks to deaden with alcohol. In turn, Marie is aware of her shallowness and inability to find spirituality in love and consequently believes that it is not Stevenson but she who deserves to feel pain (p. 108). Stevenson is conflicted; the sensitive stranger within himself, whom he is attempting to discover and to know, has become obsessed with a woman who has isolated herself because she believes that to show she cares demonstrates weakness. In order to remain with her, he too would have to learn not to care and he does not want to study that particular subject.

Eventually, Stevenson realises that his relationship with his wife is about more than himself and physical passion; between him and Holly, there is “a congruence of needs imposed by others that made him feel the relationship shared” (p. 165). In particular, there are the needs imposed by his son, Timmy, with whose loneliness and isolation he empathises and whose love he does not want to lose. Then, like the Biblical Saul, Stevenson has a vision on a road. While returning down the mountain in his truck during the onset of the cyclone, he seems to see his son sitting alongside him, telling him repeatedly he does not want to go back to boarding school. Timmy does not want to live away from home or to be with his father and another woman; he wants to be together with his mother and father as part of a family. Stevenson recalls the model plane he once gave Timmy: although the gift was initially rejected, he would later see the boy hunched over it intently, “stroking the wingspan like a lover” as Timmy comprehends how much the plane symbolises his father’s love for him. Stevenson ultimately realises that he does not want to continue in a life with Marie Latimer in which he is dying spiritually, as well as physically. She cannot tell him she loves him, and neither of them believes that she will ever actually be his wife, even when she reveals in the aftermath of the storm that she is pregnant. Ultimately, he refuses to succumb to the temptation of death as an easy way out proffered by his medication; instead, he decides to embrace the needs of others and to live, even if that does mean staying in a marriage that could well remain loveless. While Kathleen Seabrook realises that she is now “miraculously unbound from the rock of twenty years of marriage” (p. 183) as she leaves the island after the storm, Stevenson’s new-found sense of duty to his family and of love for his son will bind him to that rock. In making that choice, he perceives an integrity within himself worth preserving, in keeping with his belief that, “We must concern ourselves [with others] (p. 83). In doing so, he becomes one of the few characters in *Boat Load* who stands, as Matthews so aptly puts it, “pitifully but unmistakably against the hurricane,” strengthened by the vision of his epiphany (Sheridan and Genoni, p.53).

The same, however, cannot be said for most of the others stranded on the island, for this storm is not just a literal storm trapping them there. It is also a storm of hypocrisy, vanity, stupidity and maliciousness, generated by those who refuse to be part of the group and so who have isolated themselves from their companions and from their own selves. In Astley’s world, however, you cannot go it alone; only staying together as a community provides protection from the storm, and yet so many of the characters of *Boat Load* are, in their isolation, living unprotected within their own individual cyclones. Unlike Stevenson, they are “afraid to examine the gyrating circumference of mortality spinning around them because they are afraid of what such an apocalypse might reveal” (Astley, 1965, p. 195). However, cyclones are ineludible: one cannot stop them any more than change their direction. Some damage is subsequently inevitable. This

inescapable apocalypse reveals the inner lives of these home folk as well as judging their worth. Five of *Boat Load*'s characters, Verna Paradise, Kitty Trumper, Father Lake, and Gerald and Kathleen Seabrook, are already on the edge of cyclones in Astley's preceding novel, *The Slow Natives* (1965), the title of which, Astley suggests in its epigraph, was derived from a joke about elephants stomping on those who do not keep moving fast enough. It is not essential to have read *Slow Natives* before reading *Boat Load*, but it does give context to the character development. Astley impels these characters, whose parishes are now removed to an island where they are forced to become slow natives, into intimate and prolonged proximity to each other. Astley's suburban and small town worlds of *Slow Natives* are ones in which "adults talked and corrupted each other, slandered, hated, betrayed, remained pathetically loyal and pretended . . . self-containment, assurance . . ." (p. 16). These marooned townspeople are overtaken by an apocalypse that not only exposes their underlying corruptible natures but also judges them. In this sense, as Susan Lever suggests, *A Boat Load of Home Folk* can be read as a morality tale in which nature indulges in revelatory judgement. "The tropical island represents nature," she observes, "and nature, in the form of a tropical cyclone, reaps retribution on the whites for their sins" (Astley, 2008, p. 131).

In *Slow Natives*, Iris Levenson asks her husband prophetically: "Think of an island. Think of the most gem-like exotically gleaming island you can. . . . Who would you most hate to be wrecked with?" (1965, p. 8). For Kathleen and Gerald Seabrook, that person will be each other. They are trying to repair their marriage that has foundered on the reef of Gerald's susceptibility to seduction when they re-appear in *Boat Load*. Gerald does not appear to have learned anything by his latest domestic disaster; consequently, for him this voyage is merely a "pseudo-placatory gesture to patch a marital breach" (1968, p. 4). Kathleen, "tired of the endless charm, the plausibility, the way you work on others" (p. 9), already hates him in any case. Seabrook's rejection of his wife is subtle; he maliciously refuses to do anything to alleviate her unhappiness with their marriage. He constantly attempts to seduce women to reassure himself of his masculinity, even though success is unfulfilling. His liaisons become, instead, crumbling farces "of stale gesture and promise, unmoistened by the tears of his wife or even of the other women he had used and forgotten" (p. 155). Kathleen has grown tired of his endless charm and plausibility and the way he manipulates people (p. 9), but that is all just a defence mechanism for Gerald. Behind the jocular façade, he is in fact a man who lives in fear that he might actually be the joke, and so he constantly needs to be reassured that he exists by turning to other people without realising that his wife, too, longs to be loved. However, her love for Gerald is rapidly eroding, and Kathleen has been indulging in some sexual revenge of her own while considering their relationship's ultimate fate. Although aware that she might not have the self-confidence to divorce Gerald, she

nevertheless decides that, “I shall leave Gerald, for my humiliation is too constant and extended.” In her own kind of epiphany, she realises that, “I will have done all this, . . . mainly enduring, and have made no ripple at all on the surface of existence and none on him. Victim. All the time victim” (p. 160). Like fellow passenger Kitty Trumper, Kathleen perceives herself as martyr, as a woman whom Gerald and her occasional lovers never really see, and she vows that in the future she will “avoid the lilt and fall and rhythm that men create in me” (p. 215). Unlike Stevenson, Gerald never really does see anyone but himself; he experiences no epiphany that will unite him with his family, only a solitary desire for revenge as he vows at the end of the novel to continue punishing Kathleen.

Living in a house filled with framed pictures of herself, vain and superstitious Kitty Trumper, “thrower of salt, the avoider of ladders, the reader of astrological forecasts” (1965, p. 88), is a fifty-something former ballerina who remains “desperately discreet about the exact position of time’s finger” (p. 91). Inevitably, though, age and tragic events have taken their toll. Her forehead furrowed by “barbed wire worries,” the Kitty of *Slow Natives* already desires to be a saint to atone for her sin of having an abortion during World War Two (p. 93). “You love to crucify yourself. You’re a born martyr,” Verna Paradise accuses, reminding Kitty that even her school nickname was ‘Alma Martyr’ (p. 99). True to her self-imposed calling, Kitty has faithfully carried her guilt with her every day, saving her sleeping tablets while contemplating suicide, yet never indulging in that luxury because, like the dedicated martyr she is, Kitty daily resolves that it is nobler to remain alive and endure. Her guilt is then compounded when she turns to her gardener, the virginal teenage Chookie, for physical solace. Ultimately unable to accept such surrender to mortal desire, the woman who desires immortality cries rape and Chookie is forced to flee, only to be killed in a car accident before she can ask his forgiveness. There is more than a touch of dark irony, if not some judgement of the gods, in her eventual death at the onset of the cyclone in *Boat Load* when she is assaulted by another boy who rejects her because of her age and lack of beauty.

Her friend Verna Paradise, dressed in clothes as multi-coloured as a tropical bird, with her painted face and fingers laden with opals, has played hard to get since the age of sixteen, a game at which she has been much too successful. Now, when she would like to have someone with her, she has no-one. Nevertheless, in common with Kitty she has always expected that men will be attracted to her. Now, she is bitter that seduction is drifting beyond her ageing grasp. Although each new place in which she arrives and its unknown people “insisted on the possibility of exotic chance and, although she had long ago desisted from active optimism, a Mister Right. . . . She didn’t really care if it were Mr Wrong, although at sixty-two she knew, and her friends told her so, she should have had more sense” (1968, p. 7). With her eyes hidden by large, dark, circular

sunglasses, the tall and angular Miss Paradise looks like some predatory insect seeking prey; naturally cruel, she's feigned kindness for years to keep Kitty Trumper as her last and only friend, for "Miss Trumper needed Miss Paradise more than Miss Paradise needed her" (p. 93). But, the cyclone of *Boat Load* strips away the layers of that pretence and destroys the Eden of their relationship.

Verna Paradise becomes increasingly frustrated that Kitty Trumper can never forgive herself; her sins never leave her, filling and possessing her life, turning her into a "wary, god-frightened figure . . . cowering before imagined divine wraths and counting her sins on her fingers" (p. 94). She constantly feels she deserves to be punished, an attitude that angers Verna. "It's what you want, isn't it?" she rails at her. "I mean you are really longing to be punished, aren't you, for real or imagined sin? So you can't lose, whatever happens" (p. 93). It was, appropriately, Kitty's curiosity about the existence of hell-fire that triggered their journey to a real inferno because, in a moment of sly maliciousness, Verna suggested that they should visit a volcano so that Kitty could look into it and have her first glimpse of the hell-fire she so desires to experience (p. 95). However, once they are on the island together, both women are suddenly aware that they are actually alone. Verna has a "moment of prescient emptiness" when realising that for "thirty frustrating years" she has been driven by the need to possess men but now that need has gone, leaving her terrified she will not be able to regain possession of herself (p. 87). Kitty realises she no longer feels completely absorbed by guilt and sin, and that "with their going she seemed to be left with nothing at all" (p. 87). As a result of this sudden emptiness, she loses her will to go on and Verna loses her patience, telling her old friend that she is tired of listening to her complaints and of trying to please her. In one savage, violent attack, Verna rejects her "best and only friend, her last and respected friend" (p. 88), an isolating action that ultimately leads to Kitty's death. As Kitty flees this vituperative creature, "her aloneness horrified her," but she knows that this is the defining moment of her life (p. 89). Abandoned by her friend, Kitty sets out painfully and fearfully on her personal Calvary journey, knowing within herself that she must do this "because you have come a long way for this very thing and until you have done it you will be obsessed" (p. 101). This journey towards her fear is the long-awaited destiny that she must fulfil.

However, when she reaches the crater, Kitty does not find her anticipated pit of fiery hell. Instead, she sees the water of a lagoon, and as the cyclone strikes the island she experiences in the wind and rain an inner turmoil "that matched in its [the lagoon's] surgings the inward gusts of guilt that had been her terrible sea for half a lifetime" (p. 102). As if to wash away that guilt in a form of baptism, Kitty strips naked and immerses herself in the lagoon. Then, at a moment when the storm pauses, like Elizabeth Hunter emerging into the cyclone's eye in Patrick White's *The Eye of the*

Storm (1977), when “all else was dissolved by this lustrous moment made visible in the eye of the storm” (p. 410), Kitty has her own epiphany. The rain stops, the wind dies away and the trees become still, seemingly watching her, as Hunter too felt watched by the eye, and when Kitty emerges to dry herself in the brief sunlight, she sees she has “no shadow at all” (p. 104). Absolved, she no longer throws a shadow of guilt. Cleansed, she is now unwittingly ready to meet her fate at the hands of a thief on her way down the mountain. It is Stevenson who later discovers her dying of shock by the roadside and who drives her into the port town already under attack by the elements. Although she dies there without the final blessing of Father Lake, she has already been accepted by the storm and then by the sea that ultimately “beds down the once-lovely Trumper” (p. 218). Too late, Verna “hated herself for once and wished undone what was irremediable” (p. 149). Now she is left truly alone to assume Kitty’s mantle of guilt, while Kitty remains in a paradise that does not reject her.

Such is the group marooned on the island by the oncoming cyclone, a storm to which Astley gives animistic qualities, similar to those Vance Palmer gives to the storm in *Cyclone* (1947), when Fay Donnolly envisions the vast, scaly bulk of the wounded, mythic Leviathan within it, rearing his “enormous head, dripping with weed and wrack” (p. 159). Astley’s cyclone, too, has been pursuing this island all day like some blood-crazed beast of prey until it has finally caught it (p. 145) and then, seizing its quarry, the storm has set about devouring it. This is a contest of primitive gods in which nature defeats a religion that has been artificially imposed on this environment, a surrender symbolised by the statue of Our Lady of Sion left lying face down in the grass (p. 170), and by the empty ritual of a Mass that merely mollifies faces that have already begun to turn away (p. 218). The island is not the paradise it appears to be superficially; it is as dark and threatening as it is tropical and bright. Over picture postcard palm trees and beaches looms the active, smoking volcano of Tongoa, so powerful in its dominance of place that Miss Paradise finds herself repeating its name over and over in “a kind of hieratic rhythm” before she even sets foot on the island, as if to placate some pagan entity with ritual (p. 6). Even Kitty Trumper considers that “something in its force and ashen sterile curves attracted her like God” (p. 91). The trees are like “great prongs” and the birds have left the island. The hills stagger back from the heat, the ‘passion vine jungle’ walls the inhabitants in, and even the bar’s favourite tune is the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby,” perennially reminding the clientele of all the lonely people. In this place, Lily the barmaid declares, “We are all waiting for something. Who knows for what?” (p. 115). As they disembark from the ship, the travellers’ faces are already like savage gardens, and they will find that this is an Eden in which serpents are alive and well.

In fact Father Lake, one of the resident island priests, has already met his serpent and been unable to resist the voice of temptation. Under investigation because of his involvement with one of the native boys, Lake is isolated by his struggles with his faith and his sexuality. Afflicted by boredom, alienated from his profession, Lake is now self-destructively intent on leaving the priesthood and an island where the brilliance of the Light of God is outshone by “heat, by everlasting summer, by sea dazzle, by sweat, by the apathy of the congregation . . . by his own growing despair” (p. 19). According to Lake’s bishop, Deladier, such despair is the unforgiveable sin, and it is while sinking into this Slough of Despond that pilgrim Lake finally succumbs to temptation in the form of houseboy Johnny Terope. Sixteen year-old Terope symbolises the potential of paradise to corrupt. Already far too knowing about older people’s desires, he is also Lake’s nemesis. In the face of such temptation, Lake is afraid of himself and with good reason. Unable to find anyone to listen to his cries for help, stranded within his cyclone’s eye at “the middle of the world, the ripe, seedy, pulpy middle”(p. 27), he seems helpless when confronted with his oncoming destruction upon being discovered in an embrace with Terope. Opportunistically seizing his advantage, Terope writes a letter of complaint to the local Resident that results in Lake being investigated by his church. Astley reveals at the end of the novel that Terope is also the thief who terrorises Kitty Trumper on her return from the volcano, although he is more interested in robbing her than in any sexual attack. In fact, Astley implies, it is Terope’s sexual denial of her because he considers her ugly, rather than any physical violence, that finally kills her. Ultimately, she dies from shame and humiliation as much as from exposure to the elements. It is as if Terope, a figure of moral judgement for Kitty as he is for Lake, arrives from within the cyclone to strip away her last layers of deception, leaving her inner person as naked as her outer body. Ultimately, Kitty dies from exposure to herself.

Kitty and Lake’s sins come together when Lake, still obsessed with self-destruction, refuses to help or offer comfort to the dying Kitty when she is brought back to the bar. “I wasn’t fit by my own standards,” he explains later but by the time he admits responsibility to himself, it is too late; he has refused the kindness and the duty of absolution, and she has died unconfessed and unshriven (p. 200). In the wake of the cyclone, Lake is left with, “at the centre of it all, like the red heart of the volcanic core, his own blazoned guilt” (p. 212). The “wind-purge” of that night has cleansed him of pretence; as he leaves the island, he can now admit to himself his true nature: that he feels “nothing at all, no responsibility of any kind, no moral urgency. That was it, the end, the finish” (p. 208). He, too, has been confronted by the revelations of the cyclone.

Ironically, rather than the kindness that Astley suggested should be the motivating force, it is guilt that serves as the bond between many of the characters of *Boat Load*, most of whom carry

some measure of it. As well as the guilt carried by Trumper and Lake, for example, Miss Paradise feels guilt for her bitterness and anger that exiled Kitty to her death; Kathleen Seabrook feels guilty whether she stays with her husband or leaves him, and Stevenson feels guilty for sending his son to a boarding school and taking a mistress. Guilt binds the group who seeks shelter in Miss Latimer's apartment into a community that survives those storm-wracked hours as they discover in each other their collective strength. Their culminating moment is Verna Paradise's serving of a meal of cardboard concealed in white sauce. On one level, is an act of revenge meant to expose a man's stupidity: Verna wants to make the foolish Gerald Seabrook "munch folly," which he obligingly does, refusing to admit to himself or to anyone what he's actually eating (p. 181). On the other hand, as "priestess Paradise," Verna serves a meal that is also an act of communion; it draws the group together in its eating and, for some, in the secret knowledge of the recipe (p. 182). As a result, some are freed of their guilt and share types of rebirth. As American Kai Erikson has observed about communities who have endured traumatic experiences, "For one dreadful minute, people can feel that their community is destroyed, that they are now naked and alone in a terrifying wilderness of ruins, but then there is a surge of euphoria as people realize that their community has survived . . . In celebrating the recovery of the community, they are also celebrating their own rebirth" (1995, p. 235). Katherine Seabrook, for example, who has reverted to sucking her thumb while asleep, is rebirthed physically and spiritually; she awakes like a child the morning after the cyclone, realising that she will not now "be won or beaten back" and that she is "miraculously unbound from the rock of twenty years of marriage" (p. 183). This small community of cyclone survivors discovers a strength through common experience that helps them endure the storm. This experience has changed them, and so their personal world will not be the same as before. Due to their post-trauma shared perspectives, Erikson notes, "they look out at the world through different lenses. And in that sense they may be said to have experienced not only a) a changed sense of self and b) a changed way of relating to others, but c) a changed world view altogether" (p. 241). They have received revelations of both the end and the beginning.

In *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, Astley's every-day people are encompassed by cyclones within as well as without. Eventually, Astley declares, "The outer storm was beginning to match the inner one" (1968, p. 143). As they attempt to cope with these storms, they change her characters' views of themselves, of others, and of their world. Some are touched by the edges of cyclones while others are consumed by them, but no-one escapes them. As Astley warns, from the moment of birth, we are in the storm. Rather than the pessimistic and depressing novel some have claimed it to be, *A Boat Load of Home Folk* is a profound novel of the human experience in which Thea Astley uses the elemental cyclone as a trope of apocalypse that is at once an instrument of

destruction and a catalyst of revelation. As such, this novel has a meaningful place within Queensland and international literature that employs tropes of cyclonic storms. Weighed in moral balances by the elemental gods of whirling air, some of Astley's home folk are found wanting; yet in the aftermath of the cyclone, amongst the ruins, others experience revelations of understanding and enlightenment.

Chapter Four

Threading The Eye of the Cyclone: Elizabeth Hunter's epiphany in Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm*

“At the still point of the turning world.” T.S. Eliot.

At the centre of *The Eye of the Storm*, within the eye of an encircling emotional and spiritual tempest, is the aged and bed-ridden matriarch Elizabeth Hunter. As she becomes less able to see outward, Hunter's sight turns inward in her attempt to understand the significance of the most meaningful point in her life: an epiphany fifteen years earlier during a Queensland tropical cyclone that ravaged White's fictional Brumby Island. While her daughter, Dorothy, chose to run from this storm, the formidable Hunter remained on the island to meet the gaze of the eye in which she experienced an epiphany that revealed the insignificance of her life and the existence of a power far greater than her own. While on the island, she becomes aware that her life has been significantly favoured: she has retained her beauty, her wealth, her sharp mind and her attractiveness to men into late age. Until now, she has taken such attributes for granted, assuming they were due to her own selfish power as a woman. Emerging out of the cyclone into the eye, however, she realises that there is a greater power in the universe that she must accept in order for her life to end at the appropriate time with meaning, and her acceptance of this revelation is symbolised in a communion-like act within the eye when seven black swans accept bread from her. Subsequently, even though Elizabeth Hunter does not appear to change that much superficially, she does alter her perception on her life and on its significance, and her ultimate reward for this endeavour is that when she does eventually die, she does so understanding the meaning of her life and timing of her death. However, Hunter's journey to the end of her life is not easy. White believed one needed to suffer in order to find the right path through the labyrinth of one's life, often symbolised by White with the pattern of the mandala because the symmetry appealed to him and he found life symmetrical (Marr, 1994, p. 412). Hunter suffers as she is stripped of all things material by the cyclonic storm, as the storm of old age ravages the beauty and dignity of which she was once so proud, as she remembers the betrayals and failures of her past, and as her thankless and loveless children hover around her bedside like Dickensian vultures. Only by enduring the inner storm as well as the outer one can she thread her way through the eye of the cyclone to the still centre.

White invested much of himself in *The Eye of the Storm*, as well as his spiritual philosophy. In his memoir *Flaws in the Glass*, White claims the original idea for the novel came to him as a “flash of prescience” after a visit with his elderly mother in London, shortly before her death in 1963 (1981, p. 149). Like Elizabeth Hunter, she was in her eighties, nearly blind and confined to a bed where she was surrounded by a bevy of nurses, and she died sitting on her commode (Marr, 1994, p. 242). Like Hunter’s children, Basil and Dorothy, White and his sister had attempted unsuccessfully to persuade their mother to live in a nursing home and to divide her possessions to avoid taxes. His problematic relationship with his mother and the circumstances of her death had a profound impact on White who informed Cynthia Nolan that his female protagonist would be, “a great beauty, bitch, charismatic figure, destroyer and affirmer all in one” (Marr, 1994, p. 402). His characterisation of Elizabeth Hunter certainly includes those qualities. During the next few years he continued to turn ideas over in his mind for a novel about such a woman, writing to James Stern in 1966 that, “I have an idea for a novel I am going to write one day, about a similar mummy, half senile, but with moments of blinding, brutal perception” (1994, p. 295). By mid-1970, White had almost finished the first draft of his new novel, having written to Geoffrey Dutton in January that, “I have never known so much about a book before starting to write it” (Marr, 1994, p. 353). However, the writing of such a personal work grew increasingly harder. “This seems to me the most difficult book I have attempted,” he wrote. “Everything becomes more gnarled and inward-looking” (1994, p. 371). Nevertheless, he kept writing and by the time he was completing the work three years later, he had become aware of its profound significance to his canon. “I am obsessed by my latest book *The Eye of the Storm*,” he replied to a query about his religious philosophy, “because in it I think I have come closer to giving the final answer” (1994, p. 409). While the novel “is in one sense the still centre of the actual cyclone,” White reflected, it is “in another the state of peace and spiritual awareness which Mrs Hunter reaches on the island and again before her death” (Marr, 1994, p. 412). While *The Eye of the Storm* does have origins within White’s life, then, it transcends those personal matters to address the universal search for a spiritual path.

It was a search in which White was also engaged during his life. Although raised as a member of the Church of England, White drifted away from it as he “went through youth believing in nothing but my own ego, because I had to rebel against my family and imagine I was an intellectual” (1994, p. 196). Then, one night immediately prior to Christmas, 1951, he fell in the mud of his Castle Hill farmyard while carrying food to some puppies during a storm. As he lay there, blinded by rain and cursing “a God in whom I did not believe,” he had an epiphany about his mortality and lack of spiritual hope. “It was the turning point,” White considered. “My disbelief appeared as farcical as my fall. At that moment I was truly humbled” (1981, p. 144). Not long after that, he wrote in a letter,

“faith began to come to me,” although he did not in the end return to formal religion despite some attempts. Ultimately, he decided that “Churches destroy the mystery of God,” and so he “had to evolve symbols of my own through which to worship” (1994, p. 196). His spirit remained “erratic,” he claimed, for was it “ever possible to believe entirely in somebody one knows by heart, who is, at the same time, the one it is impossible to know?” (1981, pp. 144-145). David Marr argues that, “*The Eye of the Storm* has the fundamental plot of all the books White wrote after falling in the storm at Castle Hill: the erratic, often unconscious search for God” (1994, p. 354), but the deity for which White searched remained for him an unknown and unknowable God. Consequently, White does not seek to reveal the processes of such a hidden God because they, too, are unknown.

Instead, White’s chief concern is with human existence and man’s spiritual predicament, what he considered as “the relationship between the blundering human being and God. . . . Everyone can make mistakes, including God. I believe God does intervene; I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator, who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to be open to him” (White, 1990, p. 24). White’s characters struggle within their human limitations to understand their destiny and to comprehend the nature of this hidden deity but ultimately that deity is beyond their comprehension. However, as White pointed out, that does not mean his God is remote. According to Peter Beatson, White considered that there was always potential for moments of dialogue between the individual and God, and that one should accept the opportunity for dialogue when God offered it, for it was by engaging in such conversations, White believed, that the individual could ultimately achieve union with God (1977, p. 9).

However, there would be periods of suffering that were part of the journey towards union because it was only by and through suffering that one could return by grace to the presence of God. White believed that this spiritual journey was a cycle, as Laura Trevelyan explains in *Voss*: “How important it is to understand the three stages. Of God into man. Man. And man returning into God” (1957, p. 411). Despite the obvious reference to incarnation, this was not an orthodox Christian pattern overseen by an orthodox god. White said that in his books he had “lifted bits from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding; I’ve made use of religious themes and symbols” (1990, p. 25) and, indeed, the range of his mythical and cultural references is too wide to confine White to any single belief system. The symbolic circular pattern at the centre of which is a hidden spiritual presence overlays much of his work, and as a type of that pattern White favoured the Eastern mandala: the circle or circles within the square surrounding a spiritual centre that symbolise the totality of the self and the unity of the individual with the cosmos. However, although he wrote an earlier novel titled *The Solid Mandala* (1966), he evidently did not consciously intend to impose that particular symbolic pattern onto *The Eye of the Storm*. “I hadn’t thought of *The Eye of the Storm* as

being ‘mandalic,’ but I suppose it is,” he wrote in 1973, just after finishing the book. “*A propos* mandalas, I suppose symmetry appeals to me, and life I find symmetrical, when I used think it haphazard, without design” (1994, p. 412). Traditionally, a mandala can be expressed in physical terms (for example, as a structural design) or it can be identified within one’s body, or it can be a mental construct within which the individual places themselves as a defence against distraction in order to concentrate on the spiritual presence at the centre. Thus, the mandala can represent both a macrocosm as an *imago mundi* and a microcosm within one’s own body, and the discovery of the right path through it can enable a person to reach “the very heart of the real,” according to Mircea Eliade. (1991, p. 54).

However, the mandala is not the only cultural representation of the cycle of life and the search for meaning. Similar concentric circle representations appear in the cultures of many Native American tribes such as the Hopi people, for example, in which the lines “represent the course a person follows on his ‘road of life’ as he passes through birth, death, rebirth,” according to William Least Heat-Moon (1984, p. 185). The Hopi believe that they are on a journey towards union with the greater universe, an emergence into a realization that life is about more than just the physical self, and the concentric circle pattern is a map of that journey and emergence. “Our religion keeps reminding us that we aren’t just wills and thoughts,” a young Hopi man explains to Heat-Moon. “We’re also sand and wind and thunder. Rain. The seasons. All things” (p. 187). In this way, Heat-Moon observes, such symbols are “a reminder of cosmic patterns that all human beings move in” (p. 185). W. B. Yeats envisioned such patterns as gyres: interpenetrating spirals or cones that whirled around inside one another, representing the constant movement of the human consciousness, either collectively or individually, from one state to another over time, such as from love to hate. He considered that the interpenetrating gyres were “the archetypal pattern which is mirrored and remirrored by all life,” maintains Richard Ellman (1969, p. 231). What one should seek is balance and harmony at the intersection of the gyres, argued Yeats, because we all have the propensity for opposites that will pull us away from that centre, as he wrote in “The Second Coming”:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” (1971, p. 99)

This centre is, according to T. S. Eliot in “Burnt Norton” in *Four Quartets*, “the still point of the turning world,’ that point at which “past and future are gathered,” a point where there is freedom from desire,

release from action and suffering, release from the inner
And the outer compulsion, yet surrounded

By a grace of sense, a white light still and moving (1966, pp. 15-16)

It is to this still point at the eye of the cyclone, at the centre of the universal spiral pattern, that White directs his reader's attention.

At the centre of White's spiral pattern is the in-dwelling God: the 'I' that Beatson defines as the "core of being at the centre of personality which, while being inextricably involved with the temperament and the body, must answer ultimately to the One that lies beyond the material world" (1974, p. 219). For White, that 'One that lies beyond the material world' is a God that White leaves hidden because he is primarily interested in the human struggle rather than in spiritual exegesis. Until Elizabeth Hunter emerges into the eye of the cyclone, she has been too occupied with her material world to notice the spiritual one but suddenly, here in this still point of the circling world, she experiences an epiphany that reveals the hidden God to her and how the 'I' within her might answer to Him. There she has a dialogue with that spiritual presence during which she realises her life has a deeper, more spiritual meaning than that which she had previously believed. Her ultimate reward for accepting this revelation will be the union at the time of her death of her in-dwelling 'I' with the hidden God. However, the world of being, represented by her children and all their trivial materialism, threatens to intrude on her search and cause her to deviate from her journey. Such a deviation could prevent her arriving at the end of her life journey: the spiritual centre where her transformation at the moment of death will eliminate her corporeal matter, releasing her in-dwelling god, her "I", to achieve union with the universal Eye: the hidden God.

It is with these complications of human existence that White is primarily concerned, as his characters struggle "within the limitations of their existence to understand the destiny that God has imposed upon them" (Beatson, 1977, p. 9). Such encounters between human and natural worlds as Hunter's epiphany in the cyclone were significant for White because they presented a chance for spiritual dialogue between the individual and God that maintained connection between the physical and the divine. White considered that one needed to accept the imperfect condition of the world and the emotional and spiritual suffering entailed in living within that imperfect state. "It is impossible to do away with the law of suffering which is the one indispensable condition of our being," White quotes Ghandi in the epigraph to his first novel, *Happy Valley* (2014): "the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress." Simone Weil referred to the powers of suffering, equally indispensable to those of joy, as "transforming." In order to "hear the universe as the vibration of the word of God," she wrote, "we have to open the very centre of our soul" to those powers (1973, p. 132), and it this choice of opening her soul that is offered to Hunter in the eye of cyclone. While it might be impossible to do away with suffering, one has a choice as to the quality of response to it. Having experienced the revelation of her true condition in the eye of the cyclone, Hunter accepts it and opens

to it, and then she traverses a personal wilderness in order to find the right path on her journey to the centre of the mandala where she will finally achieve spiritual union with the universe.

Epiphanies are enlightening, illuminating spiritual experiences. The classical Biblical epiphany is that of Saul, the persecutor of followers of Christ, who in Acts 9:3 is travelling to Damascus when a light from heaven suddenly flashes around him and a divine voice questions his motives. It is a life-changing experience for Saul, symbolised by his change of name to Paul. But, epiphanies are not limited to Biblical literature alone. They permeate the early work of James Joyce, for example, which White greatly admired, providing pivotal moments throughout his *Dubliners* stories. In “A Painful Case,” for example, James Duffy has an epiphany about the loneliness of a rejected female friend’s life after she dies and, consequently, about the loneliness of his own life (1956a, p. 130), and Gabriel Conroy, in “The Dead,” has an epiphany about his love for his wife when, “Like a tender fire of stars, moments of their life together, that no one knew of or would ever know of, broke upon and illuminated his memory” (1956b, p. 244). In *Stephen Hero*, Joyce’s protagonist defines an epiphany as “a sudden spiritual manifestation . . . the most delicate and evanescent of moments” that might appear without warning (1960, p. 216). Referring to the Ballast Office clock that he passes under constantly, Hero points out that,

It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin’s street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany. . . . Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, the supreme quality of beauty (p. 217).

Like Stephen Hero, Elizabeth Hunter realises that the spiritual focus of her eye will be brief, and it is in this moment that Hunter becomes, as Joyce puts it, “epiphanised.” In that still moment within the Yeatsian gyre, she realises the nature of her soul.

Within that moment, Hunter stands in the eye of the cyclone, surrounded by light on the waters of life, performing her own Eucharistic act by feeding seven swans floating before her. As a reward for this act, she is granted the gift of knowing the appropriate time for her death, when the eye will once again be focussed and concentrated on her. She knows that she is “not hallowed” yet (p. 323), and so she has to wait and earn this gift in the time left to her; she must “learn to re-enter” the spiritual island at the right time (p. 431). “Something I found out . . . on that island,” she declares to her children, “nothing will kill me before I am intended to die” (p. 399). When that moment comes, Hunter realises, in the moment when the eye is focussed on her, she alone “must perform whatever the eye is contemplating for me.” Ultimately, she has to use the strength of her own will to once again walk “steadily towards the water,” experiencing her final epiphany as she is enfolded by the swans,

“no longer filling the void with mock substance” (p. 532). As she undergoes the dissolution of her corporeal self, as “myself is this endlessness,” Hunter transcends her life as she is accepted into the universe around her.

Susan Gingell-Beckman argues that the swans of Hunter’s epiphanies, being creatures of the air, of water and of the earth, represent that “unity of existence” Hunter seeks to ultimately achieve and, as such, they “play a seminal role in the growth of Elizabeth’s spiritual understanding” (1982/83, p. 318). As black swans, rather than white, they evidently represent to Hunter the union of the spiritual aspect of her life with the corrupt earthly aspect of it, for so closely does she identify with the swans that she eventually subsumes them into the image she has of herself as an imperfect, flawed person, “her flaws too perfectly disguised under appearances: enormous, gaping, at times agonizing flaws” (p. 323), a person who is “a swan herself but black”(White, 1977, p. 322). At the moment of meeting the swans in the eye of the cyclone, Hunter realises she is but a “flaw at the centre of this jewel of light” (p. 409) that still exists only by grace in the midst of such destruction. That there are exactly seven swans emphasizes the significance of this moment, as seven is the number of perfect order, of the completed cycle and its renewal (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 860). These swans also appear on the shore of an island where they and Hunter are surrounded by water, which sustains the earth and sustains life. When the swans come to Hunter, she feeds them, sharing bread that the water has provided in a meal with similar symbolic communion elements to the meal Thea Astley’s group of cruise ship passengers share while sheltering from the cyclone in *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968, p. 182). Having experienced a spiritual epiphany, Hunter is re-born from the water of the storm.

A White epiphany offers, John Beston suggests,

the reassurance of a higher state of awareness in an existence that continues after death. It is a two-way process, an interaction between a higher power and the character. It is not just sent as a grace from God: the character has to have attained a certain state in order to be able to open himself or herself to the epiphany (p. 110).

Epiphanies are significant and pivotal events for characters in other White novels. In *The Aunt’s Story*, for example, Theodora is enjoined in conversations with her imaginary Holstius to reconcile the temporal and the eternal, the mind and the body by accepting that they exist. In *The Tree of Man*, Stan has an epiphany that reveals to him there is a spiritual One through whom he will find meaning in his life. Hunter experiences both of her epiphanies only when she has attained a state of preparedness, that “certain state of order,” that enables her to be open to the interaction she experiences between herself and a higher power. During that interaction, she is offered reassurance that her existence will continue in some form after her death that will occur at the appropriate time, the time of her choosing. White experienced his own personal epiphany when he fell during the storm (White, 1981, p. 144).

Although, as Beston points out, White doesn't use the actual word 'epiphany' until 1979 in *The Twyborn Affair*, long after the term had become commonplace in critical discussion about his work and after he'd stopped writing about such ecstatic experiences, he certainly fully appreciated the significance of those experiences. "The novel [Eye of the Storm] that I am working on at present," White wrote to Dr Clem Semmler in May, 1970, "seems to have a more specifically religious content and pattern than the others" (Beatson, 1977, p. 167). It is no surprise, then, that the most significant of those spiritual experiences that he includes in his novels is that of Elizabeth Hunter in the eye of the cyclone and at the time of her dying, when her spiritual self finally finds the meaning for which it has sought.

During her epiphany in the eye of the cyclone, Hunter embraces her mortality, perceiving that the jewel in which she is a flaw exists "only by grace" in the eye (p. 409). In his memoir, *Flaws in the Glass*, White remembers "the great gilded mirror, all blotches and dimples and ripples" that hung at one end of the Long Room in the Sussex house in which his family was living when he was fourteen. "I fluctuated in the watery glass," he recalled; "according to the light I retreated into the depths of the aquarium, or trembled in the foreground like a thread of pale-green samphire" (1981, p. 1). White evidently realised that perception of self can change according to the light one receives. It was only when the light of divine revelation blinded the Biblical Saul of Damascus, for example, that he finally saw and accepted God's purpose. Likewise, surrounded by light in the eye of the storm, "no longer a body, least of all a woman: the myth of her womanhood . . . exploded by the storm (1977, p. 409), Hunter is ready to accept her imperfect condition.

The apocalypse of the cyclone reveals to Elizabeth Hunter that humankind is part of a larger spiritual context, that there are more important matters in the universe than the life of Elizabeth Hunter. On the other hand, White did not believe that the universe remained remote from humankind. "I believe that God does intervene," he once commented. His all-too-human characters attempt to establish a relationship with their spiritual context and such relationships, White believed, were the moral events that ultimately influenced their lives because what he was interested in, he continued, "is the relationship between the blundering human being and God" (1990, p. 24). White's friend, Thea Astley, who once said that she hoped "so much there is a God" (2008, p. 29), and who was always "interested in the misfit, the outsider, the less than successful" (Sheridan & Genoni, 2008, p. 1), might well have termed that relationship to which White referred as being between the misfit and God. In *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968), Astley's group of misfit passengers also have their mortal lives stripped bare by a cyclone and are forced to explore the significance of relationships

with each other and with God. Although neither White nor Astley considered him or herself Christian in an orthodox sense, both explored their own kind of faith and wrote about characters who also searched for meaning.

After her epiphany Elizabeth Hunter, too, maintains her faith in a spiritual presence that she feels was watching her while she was in the cyclone's eye. As a result of her experience, she believes her suffering is part of a plan, that there must be meaning to her life. She "alone had experienced transcendence by virtue of that visit," and like the Dutch sea-captain Dorothy meets on the plane, has recognized "the sanctity and peace reflected in the eye of the storm" (p. 199). However, Hunter needs to be in a condition of readiness in order to appreciate and understand what will be revealed to her in the cyclone, and various rituals and symbols mark her progression towards that condition on Brumby Island, off the Queensland coast, where Elizabeth and Dorothy have been invited by friends, the Warmings, to share a few days with them at their beach house. Although the island's trees are being logged by timber-cutters, the island is otherwise unoccupied except for its wildlife of sea creatures, birds and the wild horses from which the island derives its name. Dorothy feels intensely out of place here, aware that she has been invited, "not because the Warmings wanted to be kind, but because they adored her mother," who is for them "a living breathing object of worship and source of oracular wisdom" (p. 363). But the Warmings have to fly back to the mainland because of a medical emergency, leaving Dorothy and her mother alone with another guest, an ecologist, over whom they compete for the next few days until Dorothy abruptly surrenders and, consumed with hatred for her mother just as her mother hates her, leaves the island.

Left alone, Hunter begins her unwitting approach towards readiness as she discovers that admitting her flaws to herself produces "a rare sense of freedom" (p. 401). She recognizes "her own type of useless, beautiful woman, . . . a mother whose children had rejected her" (p. 400). She symbolically releases herself from her confining material bonds. Having already "taken to wearing a minimum of clothes" (p. 399), she walks barefoot with the hair that had always been the "habitually controlled part of her" now uncovered and unpinned (p. 401). With a body still attractive and supple at the age of seventy, Hunter finds herself disturbed for the first time "by the mystery of her strength, of her elect life, . . . that which stretched ahead of her as far as the horizon and not even her own shadow in view" (p. 401). She becomes aware that hers is a special life, one not given to everybody and one that does not show any immediate indication of ending. Entering the forest, she has an encounter with wood-cutters at a place where "peace and light were flooding in where violence had recently exploded" (p. 402). This is a meeting with spiritual overtones for here Hunter's preparatory progress is marked by another ritual as she tastes a wood-chip that seems to her

like a “transmuted wafer,” as she sits amongst men who have become “as reverent as a cloister of nuns” in their respect for her (p. 403). However, increasingly aware of her own flawed nature, she considers this “a reverence to which she was not entitled” (p. 405) as she returns to the Warming’s house, where she washes and anoints herself before putting on a dress designed to “seduce time into relaxing its harshest law”: ageing (p. 405). Thus cleansed and prepared to receive her revelation, Hunter awaits an oncoming apocalypse heralded by the hooves of the brumbies that are, unlike her, “outrunners of life” (p. 406).

As the name Brumby Island suggests, inhabiting this place with Hunter are those archetypal symbols of passion – unriden wild horses - those “Wild horses loosen’d by the hands of Love,” according to the poet John Wolcot [Peter Pindar] (1835, p. 216). However, Elizabeth Hunter’s wild horses have rarely, if ever, been set free by love. Instead, she arrives on the island as a woman who has until now been saddled, ridden and corralled by social constraint, numerous affairs and a physically restrained marriage to her husband. While she preferred to think a style of living that allowed her to still be a hunter of men gave her freedom, to attain that she had to live with a husband who “had got the number of children required by convention from the body he had bought at an inflated price” (p. 400). She was penned within a corral of manners, marriage and materialism of her own making. In contrast to the harnessed Mrs. Hunter, these brumbies stampeding down the beach are not only symbolic outriders of the storm but they also represent those unbridled passions that she has kept under rein for so long. She settled for the securities of society, wealth, marriage and children while knowing others, such as Lillian Nutley, who rode away over the horizon for love.

According to Hunter’s childhood friend, Kate Nutley, her older sister Lillian “ran away with someone, a Russian or something,” only to be found murdered by a river somewhere in China or Siberia (p. 23). Unlike Kate, however, Hunter refuses to cry for a young woman given over so passionately to love that she died for it; she sees no tragedy here, only the glory of a woman “galloping wildly towards her death on the banks of some great Asiatic river” (p. 23). Enduring a childhood she feels to be unbearably shallow and stagnant, Elizabeth “could have slapped her friend for not hearing the thud of hooves, or seeing the magnificence of Lilian’s full gallop” (p. 24). At that time, and from then on, Hunter longs to feel that ultimate passion worth dying for, spiritual rather than sexual, until she finds it in the eye of the cyclone that then lets her live.

When the eye of the cyclone arrives, White takes Hunter through further ritual moments. With everything destroyed around her, “prepared for life to be taken from me” (p.

395), a humbled Elizabeth serves the swans that, unafraid, accept bread from her hands, recognizing “the striving of a lean and tempered spirit to answer the explosions of stiff silk with which their wings were recognising an equal” (p. 410). Having done so, she feels unable to endure further trial not just by the natural storm around her, but by her “unnaturally swollen, not to say diseased conscience” (p. 410). Plagued by the knowledge of the shambles of her relationships with her husband, her children, and her lovers, Hunter just wants to lie down on the beach and die in the storm until she is jolted from the depths of her own suffering when confronted by the sight of a dead gull impaled on the broken branch of a tree. In her mind’s eye she hears the bird’s dying cry, and it is that imagined sound that gives her back “her significance,” a self-awareness that she has not yet experienced “enough of living” and so she wants to survive (p. 410). She is inspired by this realisation to struggle back to the bunker where she endures the other side of the cyclone. Hunter is reminded by the sight of the impaled bird and by the imagined sound of its dying cry in her mind that there is no escape from suffering, although it is human nature to try. Just when she is in danger of losing her desire to live, and of becoming just another insignificant broken doll that will be buried in the sand with the other debris, her desire to keep living is revived. That bird’s death on a tree becomes her salvation. “Released from her body and all the contingencies” in the cyclone’s eye, Hunter is reunited with herself in the aftermath, knowing she has been “saved up” for a purpose rather than being merely saved (p. 413).

Hunter’s acceptance of the opportunity for self-discovery is in contrast with the experience of her daughter, Dorothy de Lascabanes, who chose not to remain with her mother on Brumby Island and face the on-coming storm. However, many years later she encounters another storm while flying to Australia to join her brother, Sir Basil Hunter, in deciding their mother’s future. Sitting next to her on the plane is a Dutch sea captain, perhaps an allusion to that legendary storm-bound harbinger of fate the Flying Dutchman, who recounts his experience of sailing into the middle of a typhoon while master of a freighter some years previously. For him, that was no chance event. “God had willed us to enter the eye . . . the still centre of the storm,” he recalls (p. 69). There, as in Elizabeth Hunter’s experience, hundreds of seagulls resting on the water in an area of remarkable peace and calm surround the Dutchman and his ship. Like the eye of that storm, this Dutchman seems to Dorothy to be “the soul of calm and wisdom” (70), a state which she could have attained years before, like her mother, instead of choosing to flee the island and the on-coming storm in a fit of jealous rage over her mother’s competitive enticement of the Norwegian scientist, Professor Pehl. Still consumed by self-doubt and lack of confidence, as she was on that earlier occasion, Dorothy cannot understand the significance of the storm’s eye that her potential

spiritual guide is attempting to reveal to her now any more than she could understand the significance of her mother's experience in it. Saddened that "it might never be given to her to enter the eye of the storm" (p. 69), she misses the last opportunity for her own epiphany.

Unlike Frank L. Baum's Dorothy Gale, who in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) was transported and enlightened by her encounter with a cyclonic storm, Patrick White's Dorothy ran away from her opportunity to be similarly enlightened and continues to wonder until the time of her mother's death, "why was it given to Elizabeth Hunter to experience the eye of the storm" (p. 71)? Defining her feelings for her mother has "remained something beyond Dorothy's understanding" for most of her life, so by now she perceives herself as a martyr to her own cause: a loving daughter who has had to endure a mother so cruel that any attempt to love her is like adoring "a jewelled scabbard in which a sword is hidden," still sharp enough in spite of age and use to slash off body parts and to impale hearts (p. 71). "Only Mother," she observes on Brumby Island, "was capable of slicing in half what amounted to a psyche, then expecting the rightful owner to share"(p. 389). That such a mother could have a spiritual experience is beyond Dorothy's conception of an appropriately ordered universe; she consoles herself by positing that perhaps her mother imagined the whole episode in order to provide herself with her own state of grace (p. 71). Still, Dorothy cannot ignore that it was her decision to escape from Brumby Island, from the "storms of her own imagining"(p. 199), and that in doing so she ran away from her chance of perceiving such truth about herself that her mother has come to understand about herself.

For, in remaining on the island and passing through the eye of the storm, Elizabeth Hunter alone "experienced transcendence" that enables her to now recognise the woman beneath the artifice (p. 199). She acknowledges to herself that as someone whose "love of life often outstripped discretion" (p. 401), she was responsible for encouraging various lovers to the point where affairs were inevitable and barely hidden. Above all, she is ultimately able to admit that, "she was a mother whose children had rejected her"(p. 400). However, Hunter remains a proud and independent woman who admits to herself years after her epiphany that she has not always allowed the understanding she gained in the cyclone's eye to guide her. Instead, as Carolyn Bliss observes, "She is not so much profoundly changed by her experience, as made aware that she should have been"(1986, p. 134). Hunter does not emerge from her experience in the eye of the cyclone a noticeably changed person; she does not suddenly or noticeably alter her attitudes or her ethics. What has altered is her *awareness* that there is a wider universe out there, in which she is merely a flaw in a jewel, and this awareness changes her attitude to her life. While she aspires to attain, to understand and

experience being such a profoundly changed person, it is a goal that is always difficult for her to reach, now knowing that she is a flawed and mortal person like everyone else. When her nurse, Mary de Santis, declares that “love is a kind of supernatural state to which I must give myself entirely, and be used up, particularly my imperfections till I am nothing,” Hunter replies that she knows she is not selfless enough but that she is determined to attain that “other love” (p. 157). While on the one hand a place of epiphany for her, Hunter’s cyclonic eye also remains that proverbial needle’s eye through which it is so difficult to pass. Love for Hunter has been a matter of possession. “I used to long for possessions,” she recalls as she reminisces about her poor childhood on the farm to Mary. “Dolls principally at that age; then jewels such as I had never seen. . . . later, and last of all, I longed to possess people who would obey me – and love me of course” (p. 156). After her experience in the cyclone, she realises that such possession is no longer relevant; she gives away her jewels to various people. Even though it might be ultimately unobtainable, being able to pass through that eye and be accepted by it is for Hunter a goal worth seeking.

But, attaining such a goal is not easy; the pathway to the centre of the spiral is complex. “Extraordinary the number of people who insist that death must be painless and easy,” Hunter reflects, “when it ought to be the highest, the most difficult peak of all: that is its whole point” (p. 184). It is only through enduring suffering, both physical and emotional, that Hunter finds her way towards that peak. She has been unreachable and occasionally unfaithful to her husband Alfred until his approaching death brings her back to him and to her first opportunity to discover the meaning of her life. Here, as her husband is dying, she seeks to be “involved in a mystery so immense and so rarely experienced” into which she will be initiated by the “fluttering soul” that she reveres (p. 198). In caring for him, she attempts to atone for her sins of not loving her husband, of leaving their home with the children to live in Sydney and her affairs with other men, in order to “participate in a miraculous transformation” with Alfred at the moment of his death as his spirit enters eternity. Then she will know the answer to the meaning of her life (p. 198). But when that moment arrives, Alfred clearly does not have the answer for which she has waited; instead, he dies asking his own question: “*Whyyy?*” (p. 198). For Elizabeth, there is no transformation nor any epiphany about the meaning of her existence. After he dies, she wanders the labyrinth of the house alone, still unable to find the right path. The only answer she encounters is the image of her flawed self in the hall mirror: an aged, ravaged old woman, “eyes strained by staring inward, in the direction of an horizon which still had to be revealed” (White, 1977, p. 198). That

horizon, and what is beyond it, will not be revealed to her until her experience in the cyclone on Brumby Island.

Elizabeth Hunter has “some mysterious . . . some kind of spiritual aspiration” to find a great love, with a “devouring desire for some relationship too rarefied to be probable” (p. 87), but in reality her experience of love has always been fraught with difficulty. “The worst thing about love between human beings,” she declares to one of her nurses, “when you’re prepared to love them they don’t want it; when they do, it’s you who can’t bear the idea” (p. 11). From early in her life when she was a poor child with few possessions, abandoned by a father who commits suicide (p. 88), Hunter has confused owning with love and control. Even her emotions have been under control. “I’ve never seen you cry, Elizabeth,” her husband observes, “unless you want something” (p. 14). Elizabeth finds that she cannot give Alfred the complete devotion that he wants: “what else she could give was more than she knew” (p. 28). Feeling hemmed in by the physical rural landscape as well as by “the landscape of her mind” (p. 28), she seeks to escape them both by withdrawing from Alfred into her own solitude or into affairs with other men while she madly lunges “after love, money, position, possessions” (p. 29). People are like dolls to her that she can own and mistreat, even drown if she so wishes (as she drowned the dolls of her friend Kate Nutley in the river near their homes) (p. 23), and consequently her children grow up constantly searching for love as well, even in the end attempting to find it with each other out of desperation. Her daughter Dorothy longs for someone in whom beauty is united with kindness. Constantly unable to find that, she offers her love to a series of maids before eventually withdrawing it altogether and descending into an unhappy marriage engineered by her mother for the sake of family prestige, a mother who actually experiences a moment of ‘spiritual gooseflesh’ on realizing she prostituted Dorothy to the French prince who humiliated her (p. 65). Worse still, her mother is sexually competitive with her, even when Hunter does not really want the man in question, such as the Norwegian marine ecologist Edvard Pehl on Brumby Island. While in the eye of the storm, Hunter is forced to acknowledge that her treatment of her son, Basil, has been just as bad. As unable to find love as his sister, Basil has had two unsuccessful marriages. “Perhaps,” Hunter accuses herself as the storm rages, “it is you who are responsible for the worst in people. Like poor little Basil sucking first at one unresponsive teat then the other . . . Instead of milk, ‘my baby’ (surely the most tragic expression?) must have drawn off the pus from everything begrudged withheld to fester inside the breast he was so cruelly offered” (p. 408). So, this storm explodes the myth of her perfect womanhood, revealing the flawed being within. It strips away the artifice of beauty, the manners and

clothes and makeup, to reveal the ageing body beneath, literally baring one of the breasts with which she could not adequately nurse her son.

For Elizabeth, that flawed being with its animal nature becomes symbolized by the skiapod, a legendary half-sea creature, half-human woman. Elizabeth first becomes spellbound by this mythical image when she sees it in a book of French engravings and lithographs while she is caring for Alfred as he is dying. She is attracted to it, not because the creature bears any specific physical resemblance to herself but because of a “spiritual semblance which will sometimes float out of the looking glass of the unconscious” (p. 194), a passage reminiscent of White’s autobiographic vision of himself in the mirror of his childhood home. The ‘spiritual semblance’ that Hunter senses at this time is that this creature appears to be, like her, unafraid of and unthreatened by death. It has an indeterminate facial expression that could be one of mystery or simply cunning dishonesty, reflecting Hunter’s state of mind that fluctuates between a desire to know the answer to the mystery of death and an awareness of the anguish her husband has endured because of her behaviour. The image of the skiapod remains in Hunter’s mind, where it is internalised in her dreams. Just before the cyclone strikes Brumby Island, she confides to Professor Pehl that she often dreams she takes the form of a skiapod, “a kind of shadowy fish, but with a woman’s face” (p. 389), and walks on the bed of the sea, sometimes with light flowing around her and at other times as if she is able to play a single beam on objects of interest. Pehl comments that some fish use a light to attract prey. By now, what was originally an indistinct spiritual symbol for Hunter has taken on a more distinct physical form, one so closely integrated with her own self-concept that if its expression looked deceitful, she considers, “you had to forgive, because it was in search of something it would probably never find” (p. 390). The skiapod has come to symbolise more than Hunter the person and her destructive egoism: it symbolises her search for meaning on which she is as fearless in her dreams as in her waking life. “I don’t think I was ever frightened,” she declares to Pehl (p. 390), despite being surrounded in her dreams by larger fish. Although Pehl reminds her that a characteristic of some deep-sea fish is their enormous mouth with which they can swallow prey larger than themselves, the stolid and scientifically-fixated professor is unable to appreciate that Hunter is the source of the radiance that attracts others to her, as he fails to understand that he is currently the prey that she is seeking, that she is “the skiapod equipped with a mouth large enough to swallow an ecologist,” as Dorothy remembers her years later as justification for hating her, having run away from the island after realising she will be the loser in the race with her mother to seduce Pehl (p. 396). Even worse, for her mother it is just a game to prove the point that even at seventy, she is still a woman who is attractive to men while her younger daughter is not. With no confidence in herself, Dorothy is just her mother’s plaything: her doll (p. 393).

If anyone, then, could be said to be undeserving of finding grace, it would surely be the predatory, selfish, and destructive Elizabeth Hunter. As Beatson suggests, “Judged by mortal standards of good and evil, she has not deserved salvation; she is, even by her own admission, much less ‘worthy’ than others around her”(p. 225). Yet, she ultimately does find grace at the time of her death. In spite, or perhaps because of her self-proclaimed fearlessness in swimming with the bigger fish, walking under water, weathering a cyclone and defying death until she is ready to accept it, in the end Hunter does find that for which she has been searching: acceptance into ‘the endlessness’ of the spiritual universe around her (p. 532). White’s novels often advocate that goodness and innocence have their distinct limitations and that redemption can only be found through suffering, through the knowledge of both good and evil. Like the eponymous character in *Voss*, for example, and Hurtle in *The Vivisector*, Hunter is, “in her own way, an explorer and an artist, and it is by living out her destiny in all its implications that she reaches the unknown. Only those who can endure the storm at its height can experience the Eye” (Beatson, 1974, p. 225). Hunter’s endurance of the cyclone and her epiphany in its eye opens her own eyes to the meaning in her life for which she has always sought. Her experience in the storm’s eye is “a precious jewel of a moment, crystallised out of her life, which glows ever after as a pledge of what is possible within a state of grace” (Bliss, 1986, p. 138). As a result of her epiphany, Hunter realises that her search has not always been carried out in ways either ethical or moral. She was always greedy in her search for that meaning, perhaps too greedy, and because she assumed that she could only gain knowledge of that meaning from people, she was seen by others as someone who devoured people, although she “had no taste, or no sustained appetite for human flesh.” Even her daughter makes the connection between her mother’s hunger and her dream of being a skiapod with “a mouth large enough to swallow an ecologist” (p. 396). In actuality Hunter, who has “always seen too clearly” (p. 14), has always wanted something more with “this other devouring desire for some relationship too rarefied to be probable” (p. 87). It has been a desire unable to be satisfied until her encounter with the eye of the storm. However, while her epiphany there profoundly alters Hunter’s perception of her place in the universe, she does not appear to change much superficially.

Typically, Elizabeth lays personal claim to her unique and life-changing experience within the cyclone and so seeks to possess it, just as she has always wanted to possess everything since she was a little girl. She explains to her nurse, Sister Mary de Santis, that as a vain and gawky little girl living in a “broken-down farmhouse, in patched dresses . . . I used to long for possessions . . . I longed to possess people who would obey me - and love me of

course” (p. 156). That longing has extended to her daughter, who feels that she too has been one of her mother’s possessions. “I am not her doll, am I? Or am I?” she cries to Professor Pehl on Brumby Island (p. 393). Elizabeth admits that she has always sought perfection in her children (p. 397), yet she has planted seeds of self-destruction within them at the same time. Unable to understand love as a mother, she treats her children like her two “rather battered” childhood dolls that she could not love equally (p. 12). She does not see them as part of her, but as “the most forbidding, the least hospitable of islands” (p. 15). In later years, as Hunter becomes increasingly bed-ridden, she substitutes those around her for her failed and lost children, but she persists in also treating them as dolls that she can control, manipulate, injure and even dress. So, while some part of her deep inside was spiritually enlightened in the eye, Hunter stills struggles to “experience a state of mind she knew existed, but which was too subtle to enter except by special grace” (p. 15).

Nevertheless, as her chosen time of death approaches, Hunter imagines herself back to the beach of the cyclone’s eye and the waiting swans. Hunter understands that, “I alone must perform whatever the eye is contemplating for me” (p. 532). She must find the strength of will to walk towards the water, to walk into the eye before it is too late, before it moves on, “leaving her to chaos” (p. 532). As the water possesses her, it becomes part of her and she part of it, and as she submits to it, she realizes that although her heart has been a “fleshy fist” with which she has loved and fought, she has survived to arrive at this place because she finally understands her epiphany on the island: that she is just a flaw in the jewel. Because she understands that, the Eye has granted her this moment. At the time of Hunter’s epiphany in the storm she was re-born of the water, but now she is being immersed in the water, signifying a dissolution of her material form into “this endlessness” (p. 532). “not a definitive extinction but a temporary re-entry into the indistinct, followed by a new creation,” according to Eliade (p. 152). As she is finally granted that “special grace,” Hunter’s sight turns inward and she experiences her second and last epiphany, that “state of mind” which finally reveals to her the answer to the mystery that eluded her at the time of her husband’s death.

According to customary moral standards, Hunter should not have received such a gift. While her husband Alfred, a true innocent, suffered through pain, deceit, torture and death, the wife who deceived him about her love and fidelity and who caused that pain demanded and received more from life than most women could hope for. Having taken for granted her beauty and sharp mind that have endured into her seventies, Hunter is for the first time “disturbed by the mystery of her strength, of her elect life,” while walking alone on Brumby Island the day before the cyclone. However, her concern is not about her life before this moment, but about that part of it “which stretched ahead of her as far as the horizon” (p. 401). Hunter has become aware that she has not deserved such quality of life: that she

has had this particular life at all is the mystery. Materialistic, possessive and greedy, she selfishly abandoned her husband and her children, yet she has been able to retain her beauty and her material possessions and the power that comes with them. But, her epiphany in the cyclone's eye reveals to Hunter the existence of a spiritual power far greater than the power of possession, and that it is possible to achieve union with that spiritual presence. Such a union will give Hunter the opportunity to achieve that greater love which has evaded her but for which she has always sought. In accepting the existence of this power and thus of her true place in the universe, Hunter will receive the "special grace" that enables her to achieve that state of mind by which she can, in death, transcend her present life.

For the rest of her life after the cyclone, her time in the eye remains "the utmost in experience" that Hunter "can never convey in words" (p. 399). Her epiphany there reveals to her a superior spiritual presence that represents itself to her as an omniscient eye before which she stands with her flaws nakedly visible, and she realises that only in accepting this as her true condition will she find the peace she seeks. Earlier, Sister de Santis declares that for her, love has always been "a kind of supernatural state to which I must give myself entirely, and be used up, particularly my imperfections, till I am nothing" (p. 157), but surrendering until she is subsumed seems impossible for Hunter, who has always wanted to be something at any cost rather than nothing. She has wanted to hold on to both her possessions and herself. "I know I am not selfless enough!" she declares to her nurse. "There is this other love, I know. Haven't I been shown? And I still can't reach it. But I shall! I shall!" (p. 157). Despite her failings, Hunter remains determined to reach that "other love." At the moment of her death, she maintains her strength of will in order to walk into the water of dissolution while the eye still sees her. There she surrenders to the enfolding wings of the black swans, no longer to be a "mock substance" but to be one who has accepted the truth of humility and so is finally granted grace.

It is through her epiphanies in the midst of apocalypse, then, that Hunter finally attains the love, acceptance and understanding she has so long desired and sought, despite her flawed humanity. Prepared at first to meet death in the storm, Elizabeth instead meets life there on terms that have nothing to do with status, possessions or money, elements that she has thought so important up until now. Hunter is a self-made woman, assembled from possessions and experience, who has believed implicitly in her dominance and control of everything around her, but the eye of the cyclone reveals that Hunter's carefully constructed womanhood is a myth. It destroys her material assurance and instead offers her something more spiritual. In this unique and peculiar place, she is no longer a body or even a woman; she is merely a flaw in a jewel that exists only by grace at the still point of this storm, surrounded by an eyewall whirling around her out beyond the beach. In the cyclone's aftermath, Elizabeth regains her sense of her body and of herself as a woman, but this is now a

consciousness that frees her rather than constrains her. This post-cyclone Elizabeth, for example, does not bother to cover her breast bared by her torn dress. Now, “nothing mattered beyond her experiencing the eye” (p. 412) and the “great joy she had experienced while released from her body” (p. 413). In accepting that there is a spiritual power greater than herself, Elizabeth Hunter is released from herself.

As reward for her acceptance and the faith that it implies, Elizabeth survives the cyclone. Instead of dying in that storm, she will live on until the appropriate moment for death arrives at some time in the future, a moment that she will need to recognise in order to participate in it. In an echo of the Greek *chairos*, the Shakespearean ‘now’ of the appropriate time that is meant to be, that time for her will be when the cyclone’s eye again approaches, this time in her mind. When it does, she will need to be in a state of readiness so that she will be accepted by the eye. “I have only to learn to re-enter and I shall be accepted,” she declares (p. 431). While death will arrive at her door one day, as it does for all people, Hunter knows that it will be on the right day. “Not before my time, . . . Nothing will kill me before I am intended to die,” she declares emphatically to her children (p. 399). When her time finally does arrive, she experiences a second epiphany in which she returns in her mind to the eye of that apocalyptic cyclone where, ever since her experience on the island, she always knew she would return. There, she must humble herself and be figuratively enfolded by the wings of the swans before what is left of her life is consumed by the passions and hungers of the human beings around her. In this moment, she alone can participate in “whatever the eye is contemplating for me” (p. 352), which is to achieve union with that eye. As she slides beneath the water, it rises into her body towards a heart no longer a fist with which to love or fight but a heart that surrenders to humility. Dubious as some of her life choices may have been, Hunter has remained an insatiable seeker after the meaning of her life, courageously willing to yield herself to experience and pay the price for it. Like Laura in *Voss*, Elizabeth Hunter has faith, perhaps not a constant faith but a dynamic one nonetheless, a faith never destroyed by any kind of storm but constantly questioned and renewed during her life until it is finally rewarded.

Chapter Five

Earth Breathing: Susan Hawthorne's cyclone within

I am in with through the cyclone
which is inside with through me
Susan Hawthorne

“**T**he poet's way of articulating the relationship between humankind and environment, person and place, is peculiar because it is experiential, not descriptive,” argues the distinguished British academic, biographer and critic Sir Andrew Jonathan Bate in his ecocritical masterpiece, *The Song of the Earth*. “Whereas the biologist, the geographer and the Green activist have narratives of dwelling, a poem may be a revelation of dwelling” (2000, p. 266). As well as being a narrative of people and place, then, the poem can also reveal the relationship between people and place, between humanity and the world within which it dwells. Bate proposes that poetic language can be a particular kind of expression that “may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature” (p. 245), strengthening humankind's ties to place and environment, perpetuating relationships between person and place, body and mind, perception and the word. However, this can be a relationship formed from destruction as well as creation. A poem can be like a clearing cut in a forest, Bate declares, “in that it is an opening to the nature of being, a making clear of the nature of dwelling. But such a clearing can only be achieved through a dividing and a destroying” (p. 280). The poetic cyclone can likewise clear a destructive opening to a personal epiphany of self and of one's relationship to place.

A cyclone is chaos, a dismantling of order whether physical or metaphysical, natural or man-made. In *The Georgics*, the Roman poet Virgil implies that “the black whirlwind” which tears up “the heavy crop far and wide from its deepest roots and tossing it on high” is the work of gods such as Jupiter who “in the midnight of storm-clouds, wields his bolts with flashing hand. At that shock,” Virgil continues, “shivers the mighty earth; far flee the beasts and o'er all the world crouching terror lays low men's hearts”(1: 317-321, 328-331). Centuries later, and on the other side of the world, Queensland poet Victor Kennedy also contended, in “Man, Building”, that the gods have a hand in nature's chaos:

There I have seen the spoil,

The vicious wreck where monsoons and the trades
 Meet with a clash, as titans set to broil
 The whole world with the menace of their blades (1949, p. 16)

Yet Kennedy still suggests that the storm is part of the cycle created by Nature, that it comes
 From chaos and to chaos soon returns;
 She builds (in bond to neither laud nor blame)
 And when her mighty arms crave rest she spurns
 Her whole creation - hill and sun and rain -
 Back to the glory of its womb again. (1949, p. 18)

It would only be with “the might – the power – of all-subduing Man,” he proposes, “he whom nature gave the plain and hill/To bruise and bend upon arm and thigh,” by whom order would be restored to such chaos by “taking nature’s will/To be his own” (p. 18). Australian writer ‘Banjo’ Paterson, too, in his “Ballad of the Calliope” (1902), implies that the survival of the eponymous ship in the catastrophic 1889 cyclone is a triumph of British marine engineering over a destructive natural force that leaped on the ships in the Samoan harbour of Apia like a lion on its prey.

Virgil, on the other hand, suggests that order within Nature is innate rather than needing to be forcibly established; violent weather has meaning and purpose because it brings rain that benefits nature’s growth when in Spring “the soil swells and calls for life-giving seed. . . . Then Heaven, the father almighty, comes down in fruitful showers into the lap of his joyous spouse . . . The bountiful land brings forth” (II: 325-332). In his poem “The Rainbow Serpent,” writer and environmental activist Mark O’Connor likewise declares the tropical Wet season is “reward/for blazing hopeless months,” always with promise of more (1990, p. 36). Although it might seem that at times disorder reigns, these poets suggest, it is all for a reason; it is all part of the natural order that will eventually re-establish itself. In fact, Virgil implies, one can make efforts to encourage it to return, to encourage fertility rather than death, creation rather than destruction, by keeping a vigilant “weather eye” on the constellations in the night sky (I: 204) while also observing the behaviour of birds, cattle, ants and frogs on the earth (I: 374-380). Despite all that man can do, however, Virgil reminds his readers that they should always be careful to venerate the gods as well and to make regular offerings. People should have faith that there is reason and meaning in the universe even if they cannot be seen, he concludes, rather than face the alternative of living in a world of complete random chaos (I: 338).

In her poem cycle, *Earth’s Breath* (2009), based on her experience of the March 2006 landfall of Cyclone Larry in North Queensland, Susan Hawthorne also searches for reason and meaning in the relationship between person and place, both of which have been subject to the

seemingly random chaos of a violent cyclonic storm. However, she immediately suggests there is actually an order within the storm by using the chronological timeline of the storm's arrival and progress as a framework for the progress of her own poem cycle. Beginning with a prologue that embeds the current cyclone within its historic context, she develops her poems within three chronological sections: "Breathless Calm," in which she investigates the period before the cyclone's arrival; "Earth's Breath," in which she realizes that the storm outside has remained within her; and "Wind's Rasp" in which she seeks to understand the trauma as well as the revelation in the aftermath of the storm. Hawthorne's epiphany as a result of her cyclone experience is that, "I am in with through the cyclone/ which is inside with through me" (p. 78): the cyclone has affected her on such an intensely personal level that it is now an integral part of who she is. In fact, it may never leave her. "The wind," she realizes, has entered/ some inner part of me/ and I cannot wrench it out" (p. 77). But this storm is more than personal: Hawthorne registers associations with other peoples and with political weather as well as meteorological as the winds of the cyclone spiral around the globe:

I am struck by the pain
In New Orleans and Bangladesh
Alike, but no one knows the name
Of the cyclone in Bangladesh
Only the numbers (pp. 70-71).

In this way, her writing speaks to broad historical, geographical and emotional landscapes as well as to intimate personal spaces, often through meticulous attention to detail in nature that implies an inter-connectedness of environments and a universe in which people recognize the role of nature by establishing a meaningful life within it.

In the course of her poem cycle, Hawthorne's interaction with the cyclone becomes intimate and complete. By the last stanza, the cyclone is now more than in her, as it is in the first stanza: it is *inside* her. As well, it is now also *with* her as a constant companion and *through* her as in completely invasive of her. Each different preposition interprets and intensifies the relationship further. By the end of the cycle, in fact, Hawthorne insinuates that the storm has become not just a presence inside her, but also an integral part of her psyche. It is now not just in her but *of* her. People who have endured a storm often refer to having been 'in' the storm, and the circling, whirling nature of the cyclone's spiral structure encourages that sense of being enveloped in the storm. William Cullen Bryant, the American Romantic poet, wrote of the hurricane as a giant of the air whose,

. . . huge and writhing arms are bent,

To clasp the zone of the firmament,
 And fold at length, in their dark embrace,
 From mountain to mountain their visible space” (1903, p. 117).

In the aftermath of such a storm, Hawthorne still feels herself within that embrace, believing herself so integrated with the storm they are both “at the heart of things” (p. 78).

In the first lines of “Prologue: South Mission, 1918,” Hawthorne perceives that her relationship with the cyclone is, in fact, part of her relationship with place. “The cyclone is in me as it must have been/ in the minds of the Djirrabal people” (p. ix), she suggests. By positioning her Prologue in a specific place and time, at South Mission Beach in 1918, Hawthorne grounds her group of poems in actual history. In early March of that year, a severe cyclone destroyed the Queensland Government’s Hull River Aboriginal Settlement at South Mission Beach, established only four years previously, killing at least six people (Holthouse, 1977, pp. 98-99). As a result, the Queensland government forcibly relocated the local Djirrabal people from that mission to Palm Island, separating them from their land and families, an exile that becomes the catalyst for the tragic events of Thea Astley’s novel *The Multiple Effects of Rainshadow* (2010), in which they accuse the wind of bringing them to the island (p. 3). However, Hawthorne argues in her poem, the Aboriginal people had already been dislocated from their ancestral stories when they were first brought to the Settlement and then by the subsequent impact of Western culture. These were stories that might have warned them of the storm’s approach and saved them “more/than any missionary from foreign lands” (p. ix), and so people perished at this place in this cyclone because they lost their connection with their environment and so with their cultural knowledge, she suggests. Yet, it had not always been that way, and Hawthorne recalls E J Banfield’s (1925) stories of Old Billy who could call up “storms of retribution,” suggesting an earlier, closer spiritual affinity of people with country that had enabled such power (p. ix), reminiscent of the spiritual relationship with country and the storm-calling power of Alexis Wright’s Norm Phantom in *Carpentaria* who stirs up the mud and water, “singing up the spirits in the water, boy, to make storms for his enemy” (2006, p. 485).

Then Hawthorne expands the scope of her historic timeframe because, she writes, “history repeats itself” (p. x). As the Native American author William Least Heat-Moon observes, circles and spirals are “a reminder of cosmic patterns that all human beings move in” (1984, p. 185), and Hawthorne acknowledges ancient symbolic links between the cyclone and the circle. “The nature of a cyclone is to circle/to turn in on itself/ like the ouroboros swallowing its tail,” she contends (p. x). The Egyptian and Greek symbol of the serpent consuming its tail, representing the eternal cycle of death springing from life and life from death, reached its ultimate form in Norse mythology as

Jormungandr (or Midgardsormr), the great serpent that encircles the world, representing the infinite cosmic cycle of creation and destruction (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, pp. 846-847). Hawthorne connects the ouroboros to other mythic serpents such as the winged serpent and the tempting serpent of the Garden of Eden that are also symbols of “the end in the beginning/ the crossing over of time” that subsume the nature of the relationship between herself and the cyclone into the eternal cycle of mankind, “the endless dance” (p. x). Although the immediate event around her is Cyclone Larry, Hawthorne refers here to the “great perturbation of wind and flood/ that recurs and recurs” (p. xi) that is the ever-returning cyclone integral to this place. In Vance Palmer’s novel *Cyclone*, Fay Donolly envisions the cyclone as Leviathan, the serpent from under the sea, “dripping with weed and wrack, from the waste of waters,” that in his death agony sweeps cays and reefs with his tail and sparks forked lightning from his tongue. This serpent, always in wait to “turn the known world to an evil waste,” periodically dies and is resurrected by the power of apocalyptic dark forces (1947, p. 159). For Hawthorne the cyclone represents, like the ouroboros, the infinite cycle of beginning and end, of life from death; that is, the very nature of apocalypse itself.

As representative of the eternal cycle, Hawthorne’s cyclone exists within more than the present geographical place; it is also part of the landscape of the climate-changed future. E J Banfield’s storm will “recur and recur” as part of the cycle but the “greenhouse storms” of the future will contain winds that will once again be the “great tempests/ of the mythic world” (1925, p. xi), but this time the seas may rise by stealth. Aristotle declared that wind was caused by a vapour, a “dry exhalation,” arising from subterranean caverns; it was different winds falling upon each other, he suggested, that caused hurricanes (*Meteorologica* II.vi.). The winds “inhale the breathless cloud,” agrees Hawthorne in reiteration of Aristotle, and in doing so create the cyclone that causes the sea to “exhale coral sand and turtle death” (p. xi) as part of the universal cycle of inhalation and exhalation that destroys and yet creates.

In the first section of *Earth’s Breath*, ‘Breathless Calm’, Hawthorne prepares for the physical cyclone but also for the metaphysical one. In “Timescale” she warns that while tourists think they see the real tropics, “only time brings other ways of seeing.” After a month of rain, “ground squelches, mould grows on clothes;” during a year one can “watch the seasons swell,” and after twenty years “you are sure to see a cyclone or two.” You learn to read the signs: despite “a perfect day in front of a mirror sea -/looks can deceive” (p. 2). Heeding Virgil’s admonition in *The Georgics* to keep an eye on animal behaviour in storm seasons (I: 204), Hawthorne reads the signs in nature of on-coming weather such as the appearance of frigate birds (p. 3). The rain that swamps

a rain gauge that is “over-filled and rising” (p. 3) is answering the call of the “the storm bird” (p. 13), also known as the channel-billed cuckoo, while butterflies such as

The blue-winged sailor
and the green birdwing
float in on storms –
they like a depression (p. 14).

Yet, as Hawthorne suggests in “Warning” and “Feast of the Senses,” humankind often ignores such natural warning signs. Although the warnings are given in plenty of time, “people have lives to live/ and the dinner was not postponed” (p. 16). Ironically, the people of Silkwood were dancing in the streets the day before the storm, celebrating the seasonal cycle. Meanwhile, the cattle were “standing in a ring/ rump out, calves surrounded” (p. 16).

By presenting the Latin species name for each creature as well as the common English name in the titles of poems, Hawthorne reminds the reader that she is no longer referring to the mythic and legendary bestiary but to creatures she encounters in her garden and in her home that are part of her place. Including them in her exploration of the cyclonic event reaffirms Hawthorne’s sense of place, yet these are also creatures that inhabit the wider world:

Butterflies circle
ringing the breezes
orbiting earth from the Amazon
to this Pacific coast (p. 15).

Their flight links her Queensland place to the wider global place. They take flight on winds that eddy around the world in the same universal spiral pattern of the cyclone, she writes, and in so doing these creatures of beauty warn of the chaos of destruction as they “betray the coming storm” (p. 15). Hawthorne sees the same circular patterns in the “olive python beside the drive” that reminds her of the legendary ouroboros that has “swallowed the world” (p. 4) and in the flight of sea eagles spiralling into the air on thermal up-draughts as she follows a similar spiral path while walking to the top of Bicton Hill, seeing the universal in the immediate.

Yet, while “the earth breathes in” and people “run to prepare/ for the exhalation” (p. 18), Hawthorne observes that many aspects of the natural life appear to continue on as usual: “flowers bloom/ leaf and petal/ as if life will go on for ever” (p. 18). The air is still, and there is little obvious warning of danger: we talk, she writes, “as if it’s the last day/ of the world and yet/ how can we believe it?” (p. 19). Even after the cyclone, she contends, life will continue on, because nature has survived more

cyclones than any human

will endure, its tall trees
grounded by vines and
keeled buttressed roots (p. 6).

Walking on Bicton Hill, near Mission Beach, Hawthorne perceives that “this hill with its layers of life . . . will go on being what it is” (p. 6).

Now that she has grounded the cyclone firmly in the history and culture of place, Hawthorne maps out the impact of it in ‘Earth’s Breath,’ the second section of her poem cycle. Here the earth exhales, resuming a breathing cycle as old as time for, she argues, “Breath is an origin story/ before breath is non-existence” (p. 22). In the Biblical story of origin, the spirit of God in the form of wind moves across a “black spaciousness beyond comprehension and without meaning” to create the earth, recounts the American writer Jan DeBlieu in her book, *Wind* (1998, p. 12). In that sense, she maintains, God is perceived as wind, as a “divine current that envelops us, swirls through us, and joins us to a great, organic, barely fathomable whole” (p. 13). One Hebrew word, *neshawmaw*, connotes not only a puff of wind or vital breath, she points out, but also “divine inspiration, intellect, . . . soul, spirit” (p. 13). It is *neshawmaw* that God breathes into Adam during the Biblical creation story, instilling him with life and intelligence. However, the winds of origin not only bestow life but, as part of the eternal cycle, they also take it away. Another Hebrew word for spirit, or breath or wind, *ruwach*, is the breath of life that God takes back from humanity at the time of the Flood. *Ruwach* was traditionally the east wind, with the help of which the plague of locusts descended on Egypt and Moses parted the Red Sea. On the other hand, the New Testament Greek equivalent of the Old Testament *ruwach* is *pneuma*, the renewing breath of the Holy Spirit at Pentacost that moves across the face of the people while at the same time moving them inwardly as part of a cycle of spiritual transformation (pp. 13-14).

However, the wind does not make an appearance in only the Jewish origin story; its “breath has spanned millennia,” Hawthorne writes (p. 22), and winds of various forms are significant in the myths of many countries. “Breath joins each person to the whole of creation,” declares DeBlieu (1998, p. 22), who notes that in the Babylonian creation epic known as the *Enuma Elish*, the four winds assist the storm god Marduk, along with evil winds that he creates such as the hurricane and cyclone, to defeat his grandmother Tiamat in battle. He then divides her into two parts, from which he creates the sky and the earth (1998, p. 21). The *Popol Vuh*, the Quiché Mayan book of creation, records that one of the Mayan gods of creation was Heart of the Sky, Hurricane (1996, p. 65). For the Navajo, too, human beings are created by *nilch’I*, the Holy Wind, which imprints on them the spirals of fingerprints to remind them from where they came and to enable them to hang on to the sky, as the ones on their toes enable them to maintain their grasp on the earth. It placed itself in the

spiral whorls of the ears of the First People and taught them to talk, and now their living breath, posture and balance remain gifts from the Wind (DeBlieu, 1998, p. 28).

The wind, then, is part of the cycle of humanity's existence, and in "Earth's Breath" Hawthorne reinforces the cyclone's mythic connections to human culture. "Myths are made of such noise," she writes, likening the storm to the "rampages of Heracles" (p. 22) and any possibility of calming it to the unlikely appearance of a Delilah "brave enough/ to calm Samson with a pair of/ scissors" (p. 22). She personifies Cyclone Larry as a shambling god-creature, "Larrikin Larry" who, with shredder over shoulder,

larks about turning bark and leaves
to confetti and in his next breath
plays graffiti artist, pasting every
wall door and window (p. 23).

However, this larrikin is deceptively playful. Suddenly, "this brat is serious," changing direction at will while blundering around with a "shredder over his shoulder", a brat that becomes seriously destructive as he exhales, "bellowing earth's grief" (p. 23). In "Cyclone Time," the darkness as monster "lopes across the void/of sea in tormented uncertainty." In the middle of the cyclone, she feels so attuned to it that

when earth exhales
we inhale, hold our breath
as that great turbine of wind
rolls over us (p. 24).

Yet, as the destruction rages outside, "inside a strange/equilibrium holds me still/in a state of cosmic acceptance." Here at her own still point, Hawthorne seems to have found her eye of the storm.

Like Elizabeth Hunter within the eye of her cyclone, Hawthorne experiences an epiphany during her cyclone experience. (In fact, beneath the title of her poem, "Eye of the Storm," Hawthorne has an epigraph taken from White's novel: "All else was dissolved by this lustrous moment made visible in the eye of the storm.") Like Hunter, the eye reveals to Hawthorne that there is more to the universe than herself. The cyclone forms around the eye and spirals out from the eye at its heart, and so "the eye patterns the storm" (p. 27). Hawthorne merges the forms and meanings of 'eye' and 'I', envisioning the eye of the storm as also the universal, panopticon eye, and that she as the personal 'I' is within the view of them both. Like Elizabeth Hunter, she realizes that this eye has the capacity to devour her if she does not accept that it is a greater power than herself: it is "all-seeing" and "all-devouring" (p. 27). It is both a physical storm and a spiritual

storm, located in a geographic place “at the southern edge of the storm,” and also “at the immaterial edge of self” (p. 27). Hawthorne’s epiphany is that even though there are significant decisions waiting to be made about life choices that seemed so important before the cyclone arrived, this storm has reduced life to its “thoroughly material” elements, stripping away the superfluous matters with “the torn shreds of leaf matter/ swirled and pasted” (p. 27) until, like Elizabeth Hunter, Hawthorne realizes that there is a force greater than herself: “the eye, the I, is always central” (p. 28). In the midst of apocalypse, there has been revelation.

In his poem, “Tully Under Cyclone,” Ivan Head experiences a similar epiphany as a cyclone approaches the town when he sees that under the dark cloud eclipsing the end of the main street is

only the narrowest belt of green
Beneath it, one sliver to be seen
below that dark and total curtain (2011, p. 126).

This vision creates the contrasting emotions within him of the Burkean sublime. Whatever could “excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror,” wrote Burke (1992), “is a source of the sublime” (p. 36), and Head feels drawn toward the beauty of the oncoming storm while at the same time he pulls back from the terror of it. He visualizes this inner struggle as a road sign on which is written the single line – “*mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*” (p. 126) – a phrase that refers to the simultaneous experience of the tremendous awe-full mystery from which one’s instinct is to turn away because the senses are unable to cope, yet to which one is simultaneously attracted because of its allure as a mystery. Like Hawthorne, Head perceives the cyclone as an all-powerful, dreadful and fearful event before which one feels helpless, unable to put it into words. Yet, at the same time, one can experience the *mysterium fascinosum*, an equal sensation of fascination and allurement, even seduction, as the spiralling storm draws the observer in as it moves inexorably closer. Terror has its own attraction; beauty can be perceived within the truly terrible. Together, these conflicting emotions form the great mystery of the sublime experience of the cyclone.

As Hawthorne emerges into the light of the storm’s aftermath she, like Elizabeth Hunter, enters a wasteland of silence where destruction reveals what has previously been concealed:

mountains we’ve never seen
islands we’ve tried to.
a beach long hidden (p. 29)

While danger still lurks here in the form of biting ants, “glass in the grass,” and fallen trees, this new world is a place of revelation. Here the experience of passing through the cyclone’s eyewall has left survivors with mixed emotions, with a “walled eye” that is “half-blind/ with fear, the other half/ in a state of exhilaration” (p. 31). In a series of wordplays, Hawthorne writes of exhausted survivors having “hit the wall” and that their ability to see through to the end of the storm is impaired when a nearby “glasswall/explodes glazing splinters across/ the horizon of our view” (p. 32). This new world is also a place of mystery where the relativity of time seems altered as “the clock moves in one time space/our bodies in another, one day by/ the clock, years by our bodies” (p. 30). They seem suspended in time here, as “a spindle seems still/ while the threads whirr at the edge” (p. 32), as if they are at T. S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world. . . . where past and future are gathered” (1966, p. 15). Hawthorne and her partner feel momentarily as if they might be the only survivors, who are “left to our solitary epiphanies” (p. 32) about the fragility of their environment.

Surrounded in the days after the cyclone by volatile weather that promotes uncertainty and instability, Hawthorne takes comfort from a sign, “a triangle of hope – /seven frigatebirds flying in formation” (p. 34), reminiscent of the seven black swans that Elizabeth Hunter encounters in the eye of the cyclone in White’s novel. As the sum of the number four, which represents the earth’s four compass points, and the number three that symbolizes heaven, “seven is the number of the completed cycle and of its renewal” (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 860). In placing seven birds in a triangle formation, Hawthorne combines traditions associated with use of the number seven with the three-point triangle symbol of divinity (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 1034), and so this formation of frigate birds, the traditional harbingers of a cyclone, signifies that an environment made incomplete by the cyclone’s damage will once again be restored to completeness.

However, for some time at least, this environment is one of chaos where the usual expectations are confounded and confused:

traffic lights point to the sky
bananas are mashed with soil
a kitchen sink in the grass . . .
a boat listing grounded (p. 38)

The substantial structure of the local hotel “is folded like an origami swan” (p. 38), and houses are “pried open . . . like a can opened,” revealing that they are merely “houses of cards/ fragile and limp” (p. 38). While they appear at first glance to still be complete, these damaged buildings “turn out to be *Evita* facades,” adding to the feelings of artificiality and instability generated in the survivors of this new post-cyclonic world where you can no longer trust what you see. Personal

tragedies, too, become artificial media clichés, such as “power-lines kiss the ground,” or “like a war zone,” that Hawthorne hears delivered by a television news reporter. The real personal tragedies of a “straggling group of porous people/she hasn’t noticed” (p. 40) are symbolized by a child’s teddy bear set out to dry or a damaged house wrapped like an art work, or “the psychic rebellion in some people’s faces/ as they tell stories of survival and entrapment” (p. 41). The camera pans over

a landscape of skeletons
trees in spiral twist, trunks unbarked, vertebrae exposed
tarsal and metatarsal, twig and branch (p. 41).

It is a damaged landscape, stripped down to a bare skeleton, as exposed as the damaged people within it.

Yet, having seen their “triangle of hope,” Hawthorn and the other survivors immediately begin to re-impose order on this chaos in “a frenzy of work” (p. 34). As she collects the fragments of their life, “afright with the energy/ of disaster day after day,” as

I climb I walk I carry I sweep
I mop I wash I wipe I sweep,

in a “rush to close up/ against more wind and rain,” it is only “with sleep we open the psyche/ to a canticle of pain” (p. 35). As Kai Erikson argues, writing about the human experience of disasters, “it is the community that offers a cushion for pain, the community that offers a context for intimacy, the community that serves as the repository for binding traditions” (1995, p. 234). In sharing their experience, particularly through stories, people who have gone through disaster and trauma discover a kinship and commonality of culture that strengthens bonds between them. “Afterwards,” Hawthorne writes,

like new lovers telling stories
we talk of all the storms we’ve ever
witnessed, all the storms
that have snatched at our lives. Stories make
sense of the new state of existence
in the post-cyclonic world (p. 42).

They tell stories from their history of different types of storms, “how dust storms coloured/ my childhood,” of her partner’s experience of sandstorms in Tunisia, of a snowstorm on Mt. Kosciusko. They find that, despite experiencing different storms at different times, there is a common thread that binds them and their experiences together: “*It’s the roar of the wind that is the same*” (p. 43).

For a short time in the aftermath of disaster, Erikson contends, people feel that their community has been irreparably destroyed by it, that they are now naked and alone in a terrifying wilderness of ruins, but then there is a surge of euphoria as they realize that the community has survived and as they seek to rebuild and re-establish old ties and networks. In celebrating the recovery of the community, he argues, they are also celebrating their own rebirth (1995, p. 235). In rebirthing their community, Hawthorne and her fellow cyclone survivors also restore the environment within which that community exists, finding that the apocalyptic destruction of the old world allows the recreation of the new. Their “slash and burn” before replanting trees,

lets in the light, makes forest into life.

Like the mosaic burners

fire renews, breaks open seed pods

. . . This cyclone

is the planet’s biodynamic gardener (p. 44).

Although their human efforts to restore order are significant to them, Hawthorne here realizes that restoration of the post-cyclonic world will also occur naturally: there will be “life imitating art, nature imitating people” (p. 44). The storm creates natural compost heaps that will be part of those created by people. Natural regeneration will occur even after disaster: “where the cyclone/ came past, leaves die, yet some/ turn again to life” (p. 45). While the winds uprooted some trees, “even the occasional tree is ready/ to fall,” Hawthorne proposes. There is a natural reason for that to happen because then, “Light comes in again” (p. 45).

Eventually Hawthorne believes that this traumatic cyclone experience has become part *of* her, not just something that happened *to* her:

this roaring *is* inside her

the body speaks

its unvoiced pain (p. 46).

She finds that even while visiting another country, “the cyclone still/ fibrillates our minds (p. 48). Three weeks later, “dreamlife and waking life/ crosshatch into fantasy and fearfulness,” and she is still waking in the night “shaken too scared/ to close my eyes, the scream strangling my breath” (p. 49). She feels the cyclone still within her, that the

wind swells in me with its ravages. A walking

catastrophe, I am goaded by furious tempests” (p. 49).

Even four months later, the cyclone is still internalized; though she is outwardly calm, the roaring cyclone has not left her. Without warning, while visiting a gallery to view an art installation she suddenly experiences

the earth roaring as if death has come
 the water rages we are mere twigs
 floating, broken by the water's wash
 and the wind –
 the wind is inside me . . .
 and this – this – cyclone inside (p. 51).

As time passes, Hawthorne continues to feel that the cyclone is at fault for the mental darkness that has overtaken her. In “Moondark” she blames “a barometric/depression for my mood” and that “my life's as flat as the moon's/dark.” It is the “rampaging wind,” she claims, that has created “the skeleton/ trees,” and the fault of

this giant eye for exposing
 all the weaknesses
 all the fractures.

For Hawthorne, these are not just fractures in structures or the earth, but they are also “the fracture in the soul.” In exposing the land, the cyclone has exposed her inner self, and in so doing it has been able to “lay waste/ the land, the body” (p. 55). With the land destroyed, her body loses the connection with place that Hawthorne felt so closely before the cyclone, and she likens this loss to the link between the health of the rainforest and cassowaries that can be broken by a cyclone. Because these flightless birds rely on the fruits of the forest for food and the forest relies on the excretion of the seeds by the bird to regenerate, they are both in danger due to deforestation from a cyclone. Even if they broaden their diet, cassowaries still run the risk of depleting their reserves and dying of starvation (p. 82). Hawthorne is thus reminded of a saying of the local Djiru people, “no forest, no food, no cassowary,” which is the theme of the tale of the girl and the cassowary in “Forest.”

When in this poem the girl first enters the rainforest, the cassowary is her guide because
 the cassowary knows her way through the forest
 She knows all the fruits of the forest
 She is mistress of the forest.

However, when the “big wind” strikes, it destroys the trees and the fruits on them. Although the cassowary shelters the girl and saves her life, in the storm's aftermath,

she no longer knows which way is up
 she hardly knows which is east or west
 which is sun and moon (p. 56).

Ultimately, unable to find their way out of the forest or sustain themselves from the dwindling, perishable food resources, they pair die there. The loss of connection and balance between nature and people, Hawthorne suggests, can be catastrophic.

Yet death and life, destruction and re-creation, are part of that eternal ouroboros-like wheel of natural life. “History repeats itself,” she declares at the beginning of her poem cycle,

the end in the beginning
the crossing over of time
as a matrix—
destruction creation
an endless dance . . . (p. x).

As part of the on-going cycle, her connection with place can be restored. As Judith Wright observes in “Cyclone, Aftermath,” although a tree felled by a storm may now be “that lovely building debased, that tower pulled down,” this is the wisdom of nature that is neither “the season of flower and serenity” nor the “oppressor of those/weeping swift-running shadows.” Nature is neither always life nor always death; rather, it is both in a constant cycle. Nature is “that wise woman past joy and grief”: a cycle that includes creation and destruction (1955, p. 14). So, even though the bare-limbed trees may have surrendered to their fate in Hawthorne’s “Candlesticks,”

. . . Birds
come and go, visible
now on the wind-
stripped boughs (p. 62).

Life is returning to this cyclone-damaged world as part of that great spiral of nature that ends where it begins.

In the last section of her cycle, ‘Wind’s Rasp,’ the arms of Hawthorne’s spiralling storm broaden and extend as her point of view moves from the personal and local to the universal cyclone. Because “the wind has entered/ some inner part of me/ and I cannot wrench it out” (p. 77), she feels part of the universal meteorology: Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, a cyclone in Bangladesh, storm surges that flood the Irrawaddy River. Hawthorne begins to see that a destructive event she once only saw as isolating her from the world is now revealing to her that she is part of humankind. “Each time the wind scrapes people from/ the earth’s surface I am in it all over again,” she writes (p. 72). However, being borne on this world-wind is not without risk: while its rising currents can lift birds aloft, for example, those same thermals can carelessly cause their death. On a seemingly perfect day, Hawthorne sees “a dying bird/with no call left/shattered by the wind’s antics” (p. 64) an image reminiscent of the dead gull that Elizabeth Hunter sees “skewered

to the snapped branch of a tree.” Hearing the death cry of that bird in her mind jolts Hunter out of surrendering to the cyclone; it causes her to challenge a power that she had previously assumed was superior by returning to her shelter and ultimately surviving (White, 1977, p. 410). As the death of that bird inspired Hunter to challenge assumptions about her place in the universe, so the death of this bird inspires Hawthorne to ask questions such as:

How does a pelican know
when it's safe to fly in
fly over in solitary silence
bringing hope? (p. 64)

Her world is no longer her known world. She no longer feels secure. Alexander von Humboldt felt a similar loss of faith after experiencing another type of disaster: an earthquake in South America. He later observed that,

When, therefore, we suddenly feel the ground move beneath us, a mysterious and natural force with which we were previously unacquainted is revealed to us as an active disturbance of stability. A moment destroys the illusion of a whole life – our deceptive faith in the repose of nature vanishes, and we feel transported as it were into a realm of unknown destructive forces. . . . and we no longer trust the ground on which we stand (1849, p. 212).

In the face of such forces, Hawthorne agrees, “The dark hurlings of nature/are terror enough for our reptile brains.” We can do no more about inevitable meteorological events than the ape in the zoo that, “beneath the sun's eclipse/ stood tom-tomming his chest.” So, she writes, “people watch/the darkening skies on television” as distanced observers rather than be immediate participants in such potentially life-changing moments (p. 65).

In “Storm Warnings,” the American poet Adrienne Rich writes about similar personal anxieties when people feel powerless before forces that they cannot influence or control, such as change, for which she uses the allegory of an oncoming storm. “Weather abroad/And weather in the heart alike come on/Regardless of prediction,” she writes. Change is inevitable, yet in the face of such approaching storms, people attempt rituals of preparation as defence. They draw curtains, close shutters and light candles, she writes, because, “These are the things we have learned to do/Who live in troubled regions.” The ‘I’ of the writer is resigned and fatalistic about the outcome of the approaching storm. Even though they indulge in the motions, they know such rituals will not ultimately protect them because there will always be “the insistent whine/ Of weather through the unsealed aperture.” Instead, the only real defence will be to find a place of inner calm as the air moves “inward toward a silent core of waiting.” We must find our own way of dealing with

change, Rich implies, because it is a constant in human life. We can close the shutters but, “The wind will rise” (1951, p. 1).

Rich observes that there is a difference between seeing that change is about to happen and coping with it:

Between foreseeing and averting change
Lies all the mastery of elements
Which clocks and weatherglasses cannot alter (p. 1).

In an effort to understand the changes wrought within her by her cyclone experience, Hawthorne looks beyond the spiral of the literal storm into the cycles of time in her poem, ‘Yugantameghaha,’ the title of which is the Sanskrit word for a gathering of clouds at the end of the ‘yuga,’ an era. “We will need to listen again to the myths that have sustained us,” she writes (Hawthorne, 2010-11, p. 114). Hawthorne sees the people of the world reacting to climate changes as being in psychic shock, like the moths in the quote from the *Bhagavad Gita* rushing to their ruin “flying right into an inferno” (p. 63). “Some say we are currently living in the Kali yuga, an epoch of destruction” (p. 82), she adds in her notes to this poem in which she envisages this current era as one of “rattling bones” and “thundering clouds/breaking the world apart” (p. 67). Yet there is still hope, she proposes, employing the trope of the Hercules moth that “climbs every building/ rising upwards through 110 floors” as he seeks the light of the moon that “he might escape earth’s pull/and melt into the inferno of light” (p. 67). The moth not only accepts that the cycle of change is inevitable in life but actively seeks for change to happen, incorporating it into life.

Such powerful and personal experience of the cyclonic storm, Hawthorne suggests in “Sista Katrina” about the 2005 New Orleans hurricane, “changes you forever” (p. 69). Her epigraph for this poem is taken from African-American author and anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston’s novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), in which the articulate and self-reliant Janie Crawford survives the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane in Florida during her search for love and her own personal identity as a woman. One of the deadliest tropical storms in North Atlantic basin history, the historical hurricane caused a storm surge across Lake Okeechobee that flooded hundreds of square miles and took the lives of some 2500 people in the Lake region and over 4000 along the storm’s overall path. Having survived a more powerful hurricane, although it was not as fatal, Hawthorne senses a commonality of experience between decades and countries, past and future, “Sister Katrina or Brother Larry” (p. 68): she, too, knows the feeling of “Days when you look at the poles of your home, wondering/where the walls went” (p. 69). At the beginning of the collection, Hawthorne speaks of how the forced disconnection of local Aborigines with country meant that they did not heed their warning instinct about the on-coming cyclone that struck

Mission Beach in 1918. Now, towards the end of the poem cycle, she again refers to that loss of connection with the environment, comparing the Seminole people who vacated the Okeechobee area prior to that hurricane to people who did not leave the New Orleans area at the time of Hurricane Katrina. “What they had known,” she writes, was all/ long forgotten” (p. 68). Those who did not heed warnings and so did not choose to leave had culturally forgotten their spiritual connection with the environment. The aftermath of Katrina is “a place scoured of hope” (p. 68). Hawthorne alludes to the differences between cyclonic events: instead of prayers, mobile phone numbers are written on walls.

However, she points out, compared to the publicity given Hurricane Katrina, the tragedy of the cyclone that struck Bangladesh in 2007 was ignored because, “. . . the world’s media/hardly murmurs. In their minds/Bangladesh is basketcase” (p. 70). Unlike Sister Katrina, some cyclones do not have a name and neither do the victims to the rest of the world. These people are deprived of more than their possessions: “Says one, We are *bhumiheen/ bhumi*–land, *been*–less” (p. 70). They are deprived of the very land itself, which has been either immersed or washed away, as were those caught up in the floods of the Okeechobee hurricane. Once again, Hawthorne reminds us of the universality of the storm experience, no matter where it might be taking place. It is “the same wind rasping through me,” she writes in ‘Irawaddy speechless,’ referring to the 2008 Nargis cyclone in Burma:

Each time the wind scrapes people from
the earth’s surface I am in it all over again.
I cry with the woman whose face is stained
with tears . . . (p. 72).

It is the same “waves pouring through the houses washing away all.” Like the mouths of the river drowned in floodwater, so are “the voices of the people strangled.” Consequently, no one knows their story; no one knows how many have died or lived. For Hawthorne, the ecosystem and the human system are likewise alive. “It is no accident that time and again earth is compared to the human body,” she argues. “Our planet, like us, is a living system – its ecosystems, like our circulatory and endocrinal systems, rise and fall responding to the events taking place on its surface and in its interior spaces” (Hawthorne, 2010-11, p. 105). The waterlogged mouths of the Irrawaddy “can hardly breathe.” Like the drowning people, they “spill breathless words/ crying out against the bruising of the land” (p., 73).

Hawthorne, however, is not one of those “drowning in the scouring sea” (p, 77). She has survived, knowing that, as she reveals in the last poem in the cycle, “Wind mind,” having experienced the epiphany of the storm, she will never be the same person as before it. The wind is

within her now; it “has entered/some inner part of me” (p. 77). She and the wind are now part of the same living system, breathing together the “warm ocean surface air” (p. 76). Now she and her fellow survivors have a similar historic cultural knowledge because of their experience that they can use to protect themselves, as did earlier indigenous inhabitants of their land, as did the Seminoles in Florida:

sea heat/hurricane wind
What we know:
we who live in houses
with walls and windows
strong enough to withstand the wind (p. 77).

Nevertheless, at times in her dreams, she longs to be sheltered within a world of water where she can hide under a large rock where the wind cannot find her. At other times, she dreams she is clinging tightly to a large tree trunk to avoid being blown away. Nevertheless, like Hurston’s Janie Crawford, she has survived. Unlike Letty in Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Wind* (1925), she will not succumb.

Rather, Hawthorne accepts that she and the cyclone are now entwined intimately and inextricably. “I am in with through the cyclone/which is inside with through me,” she concludes, believing that “the cyclone which is at the heart of things” has permeated her so that it is the very centre of her existence (p. 78). However, this is a dangerous, edgy existence, for like Thea Astley’s characters who were always “touching the edges of cyclones,” (Willbanks, 2008, p. 30) Hawthorne too feels that she and the cyclone are “at the edge of chaos.” Referring to two paintings, Spanish surrealist artist Remedios Varo’s “Still Life Revolving,” and Australian Aboriginal artist Samuel Namundja’s “Gungara (the spiralling wind), she feels that we are like the swirling objects in Varo’s painting as well as like the cross-hatched whirling winds of the Kimberleys in Namundja’s work, all spiralling simultaneously, whether at the edge or close to the centre “in a massive creation of life” (p. 78). We are all poets in the storm together, she declares, “defiantly writing” ourselves into creation while attempting to understand the whirling winds of chaos within us. “Our human experience suggests such metaphors to us,” Hawthorne contends, “as we grapple with ways of understanding ourselves and our relationship to the world whether it be earth as body, wind as breath, the great flows of rivers, oceans and lava as tears and blood, grass and trees as hair and limbs” (Hawthorne, 2010-11, p. 106). The human experience in the cyclone, then, suggests the various tropes of the cyclone; in attempting to understand them, we are trying to understand ourselves and our relationship to the place in which we live.

As Bate suggests, the experience of Hawthorne and other writers in the cyclone has opened them to the nature of being, of *who* they are in terms of *where* they are, as revealed in the lines of their poetry. In the new millennium, the function of poets could be, as Bate proposes (p. 282), to remind the next few generations that, as the noise of civilization drowns out earth's own poetry, "it is we who have the power to determine whether the earth will sing or be silent" (p. 282). There is now, he argues about the function of poetry, "an ever greater need to retain a place in the culture, in the work of human imagining, for the song that names the earth." Hawthorne agrees with him. "Poetry has always been the song that is imprinted in human culture," she declares, "and equally importantly the song that we learn from the natural world" (2010-11, p. 101). In their lines, Hawthorne and other poets have drawn on their experience to articulate the relationship between them and humanity and the environment, between person and place. A successful relationship between person and place is developed from learning to incorporate the paradoxes of order and chaos, of destruction and creation, into that relationship along with the possibilities of re-creation both personal and material that may enhance and prolong one's co-existence with the natural environment of their place.

Chapter Six

The apocalypse and epiphany of cyclone in the land of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

“ . . . the old people . . . will tell you cyclones don't come from nowhere, because there is plenty of business going on when cyclones come onto the country out of the rooftop of the world . . .” Alexis Wright.

Structurally bracketed by cyclones, Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* is permeated by the spirit of the wind and the ancestral serpent. This is a story about hope in a land of the imagination in which a prophet emerges from a cyclone to bring warning of the town's hypocrisy and an opportunity for cultures to come together. However, after the white townspeople use the prophet as a scapegoat and exile him, the town is destroyed and the land stripped bare by a second cyclone that acts as judge and executioner but which, in the true sense of apocalypse, also offers the opportunity to begin again and create anew. In this way, *Carpentaria* country is a place of both end and beginning. While on the one hand, the “little black girls” return from church on Sunday, “look around themselves at the human fall-out and announce matter-of-factly, *Armageddon begins here*” (Wright, 2007a, p. 1), this is also a land where “a child who was no stranger to her people asked if anyone could find hope. The ghosts in the memories of the old folk were listening, and said anyone can find hope in the stories: the big ones and the little ones in between” (p. 12). The stories of this land are fundamental to its very existence. As literary studies lecturer Linda Daley argues, “*Carpentaria* does more than present a critique from an Indigenous perspective. The novel also expresses a profound way of rethinking being and knowing about the world,” but more than that, she adds, this is literature that “*makes a world*” (2016, p. 9). It is a world “where legends and ghosts live side by side in the very air” (p. 12); it is a world in which events take place within cyclical patterns, embodying the cyclonic spiral patterns of the weather of Wright's geographic setting: the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Such cyclic patterns are inherent to the Aboriginal concept of time. “Aboriginal time is cyclical rather than linear,” cultural anthropologist Veronica Strang observes, “and not readily separated from space. Aboriginal people invariably favour spatial rather than temporal terms, often presenting time in this way” (1997, p. 247). Wright's concept of time in *Carpentaria* is a very different concept to Western understanding of time as linear and chronological, she contends, because “in Aboriginal time, there is no linear procession of generation and events, rather a

recurring cycle of existence" (p. 248). Daley agrees that, "The novel's events are depicted by cyclical (climatic) and generational (remembered) experiences of time rather than by the time . . . measured by clock, calendar, and chronology" (2016, p. 9). Wright has said, in fact, that when writing *Carpentaria*, she was consciously striving "to create an authentic form of Indigenous storytelling that uses the diction and vernacular of the region" (2007b, p. 84). This cyclic, multi-dimensional narrative is different in form and style from the traditional chronologically linear European mode and the result is a work that has a visual descriptive form that Wright describes as looking

something like a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories . . . forever moving, entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several tunes at once. These stories relate to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams (2007b, p. 84).

In this way, Wright's *Carpentaria* embodies similar cyclic patterns of narrative and meaning to those within White's *The Eye of the Storm*, Astley's *A Boat Load of Home Folk* and Hawthorne's poetry cycle *Earth's Breath*. These stories, too, relate to "leavings and returnings" and to "human endeavour in search of new dreams," imagined using the trope of the cyclone. Wright's cyclones are tropes of the cyclic journeys on which her characters and their place embark. Their place journeys full circle, returned by the final cyclone at the end of the novel to its original naked earth form before the ancestral creative serpent moved through it. Characters such as Norm Phantom and his son Will embark on cyclic voyages of self-discovery, while Elias Smith's body returns to the sea from whence he came. Hope sets out to find her father to bring him home, giving her grandfather Norm hope for her and for the future, hope that stories forgotten can be learned again. When Armageddon arrives in the form of the second cyclone, the ensuing apocalypse cleanses the land of Carpentaria to make way for a new world and Hope takes the knowledge and stories she has learned back out to sea in search of Will on a journey that symbolizes the potential of the future.

"To me," White states, "fiction penetrates more than the surface layers, and probes deep into the inner workings of reality" (2002, p. 13), and *Carpentaria* challenges the reader from the beginning as it probes deep into the inner workings of this particular reality. The novel's opening words, in fact, are a challenge from the storyteller: "A nation chants, but we know your story already" (2007a, p. 1). The nation might think that they have heard it before, but this version of that story is told by those on the outskirts of that nation as they look in. This is a different story than the one that is 'known,' composed of and mingled with scraps of culture: secular and spiritual, Aboriginal and European. Consequently, *Carpentaria* is not an easy novel to approach;

its style and its content defy pre-conceptions and so it has proved to be, as Louise Loomes observes, “something of an enigma in Australian literature” (2014, p. 124). Wright herself noted that, “I have to work terribly hard to get my work . . . understood. We meet white resistance all the way” (Sharrard, 2009, p. 52). While some critics have admitted to being “perplexed” and “uncertain” about *Carpentaria*, Paul Sharrard notes, others have described the book as the “greatest, most inventive and most mesmerizing Indigenous epic ever produced in Australia,” and he argues that it has “genuine significance . . . both within the space of Aboriginal fiction and within the wider field of the Australian and postcolonial novel” (2009, p. 52).

Carpentaria is a work within which Wright asserts cultural difference, speaking for herself and for her culture in a saga that harks back in its oral form and historical reach to the Norse sagas of traditional European literature; yet, it is a work that also speaks to the present (Wright, 2007b). “The orature of the ancient stories of Aboriginal Australia touches modernity in Wright’s literature,” Daley asserts, “through the formal qualities and protocols of oral storytelling within the novel form”(p. 14). Wright consciously presents her story with the voice of an Aboriginal elder (2007b, pp. 89), with all the detours, nuances and deviations from chronological time-lines typical of oral story form, having decided that “*Carpentaria* should be written as a traditional long story of our times” (2007b, p. 80). As story-teller David Gulpilil says in the film *Ten Canoes* (2006), a good story grows in its own time while putting down roots and branching out; that time could be days or even weeks but it is the time that the story takes to unfold and it is the story’s own time. *Carpentaria* is a story, as Loomes argues, that is “about the importance of the story and the ways in which story maintains memory and offers strength, resilience and the future” (2014, p. 125). While the long story of *Carpentaria*, the big story and the small ones in between, may take time to tell, it is a story that carries all times because Wright is conscious that Indigenous people live with “the stories of all the times of this country.” So, she argues, “the everyday contemporary Indigenous story world is epic,” following the patterns of the “great ancient sagas that defined the laws, customs and values of our culture,” and the oral tradition that produced such stories “resounds equally as loudly in the new stories of our times”(2007b, p. 80). That tradition resounds loudly in *Carpentaria*.

The story of *Carpentaria* is a synthesis of Aboriginal and European Christian belief and culture that cannot, as Wright herself declared, “be contained in a capsule either time or incident specific.” Wright wanted to create a work that would extend beyond fences and walls. “I wanted the novel to question the idea of boundaries,” she declares, “through exploring how ancient beliefs sit in the modern world” (2007b, p. 81). Norm Phantom, for example, passes on stories that explore such boundaries. He believes in the Bible, he tells Hope, because white people had

prospered by believing it. “The sea could part and a man could walk on water,” he declares, using as proof a combination of personal experience and his memories of the appearance of Elias. “I was walking, if you please, straight out of a world that belonged to marine creatures and what have you swimming about in sea water, who had made enemies of men in the history of Dreamtime”(2007a, p. 510). However, Phantom has developed his deep wisdom, with which he has survived the sea and cyclones, from knowledge derived from all stories, compared to Hope who has no stories and thus no wisdom for she represents the future. Stories need to be taught and remembered in order for that future to be kept alive and so, knowing this, Norm tries to teach her stories that she will be able to use in her search for Will. Mozzie Fishman, on the other hand, is less broad-minded. To him, “eons of indoctrination heaped onto the hapless by bible-bashers were the scourge of the blackfella’s earth;” for him, these stories are merely, “Biblical stories lived in somebody else’s desert” (p. 142). His own name epitomizes his identity issues; he is annoyed when people take it for granted that his European name, Fishman, means that he likes fishing or that he can provide fish, stating that, “Biblical stories about baskets of fishes and loaves of bread belonged to Jewish people or some other people” (p. 142). Fishman is not interested in the stories of other people; he is interested in the stories of his own people and in teaching them to the younger generation. However, in gathering together his group of ‘disciples,’ Will Phantom is an apprentice to Fishman’s stories in the same way that Hope is an apprentice to Norm Phantom’s stories. These are stories that provide knowledge about rules and guidance for living; loss of these stories would mean loss of culture, of history and even ultimately of life.

Wright’s stories wind in and out of each other in a helix pattern, forming the landscape and its history as much as the complexity of the characters within that landscape. The result of Wright’s unique representations of time, plot and myth in *Carpentaria*, Loomes argues, is “a discourse that displaces whiteness as the dominant paradigm” (2014, p. 125). This is a story told from the point of view of those Indigenous people who live on the outside of European settlement looking in, yet much like Western fables the stories with which Wright was familiar in her culture “are about having a belief system and principles of the right and wrong way to live” (2007b, p. 89). Stories do not belong to any one culture; all cultures hold them in order to perpetuate memory. Stories explain origins and obligations to one another and the environment, elucidate codes of morality and warn against living beyond them, point out the importance of learning to live with one another and even perhaps provide guides to physical survival in dangerous environments or circumstances. “I want to explore the gift of our true inheritances,” declares Wright, “by disallowing memories of times passed to sink into oblivion” (2002, p. 19). To avoid that oblivion, the stories that bear those memories come with their own obligations of preservation, care, and

maintenance that are best fulfilled by telling those stories, by passing them on. Sometimes, however, such an obligation can seem to be a sentence in itself, such as in the case of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* who, as penance for killing an innocent creature, an albatross, has to wander "like night, from land to land" to tell his story of the cursed voyage to a chosen few as a warning for them to heed God and be kind to the fellow inhabitants of their planet (1933, p. 344). Nevertheless, stories become history and history, argues Wright, quoting African-American writer James Baldwin, "is present in all that we do" because "it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations" (2007b, p. 83). Conversely, without stories there is no history and in the words of J. D. Woods, a South Australian journalist writing in 1879 about Australian Aborigines, "Without a history they have no past" (Loomes, 2014, p. 179). However, Wright's work is not a re-telling of documented historic event; the past pervades this narrative in the form of memory in all its unreliability and malleability. This is memory rich and poor, inherited and paid for, stolen and found, painful and sweet. This is the memory of children and old people, the living and the dead, the corporeal and the spirit. "The story has to go on," Mozzie Fishman instructs his young men. "Nothing must stop our stories, understand?" (2007a, p. 429). In *Carpentaria*, Wright's spiral helix of interweaving stories gives landscape and its people history, forming a saga of apocalypse and hope that follows the ancient traditions of heroes caught up in situations larger than themselves.

In the epic tradition, Wright begins *Carpentaria* with a creation story, an evocative account of the Gulf country being formed by the Aboriginal sacred serpent, which as,

a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. . . . Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring through – the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. . . . The water filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country. . . . They say its being is porous: it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin (pp. 1-2).

This story of beginning and of being immediately evokes a region permeated with the spiritual and the animate: a region that lives and breathes. Not only does a spirit being, but also its people and their belief system form the land. "For Aboriginal people, the land is a conscious entity that generates and responds to their actions," proposes Strang, "creating life with them, nurturing them, grieving with them and sometimes dying with them" (1997, p. 252). This is a sentient landscape in which, for example, the winding river "takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend" (Wright, 2007a, p. 2). The ebb and flow of its tides across a land that is "sometimes under water

and sometimes bone-dry” in which “the cyclones linger and regroup” are like the breathing rhythms of the giant spirit serpent lying beneath the river and the land (p. 3). Giant snakes are an integral part of Australian Aboriginal mythology; tracks commemorating their journeys, sites and actions are among the many mythic paths sung across the continent. In some form, they were in the land from the beginning, playing a part in the shaping of geographic land-forms and the people inhabiting them, and in some form they are still here. “The serpent sovereignty threaded through *Carpentaria*,” argues Daley, “is depicted as not ‘simply of the past,’ but as a living and continuing authority of everyday-to-metaphysical matters for a particular and emplaced group in the present” (2016, p. 9), and this thread connecting the physical and the metaphysical, the object and animate spirituality, exists throughout *Carpentaria*. “In Aboriginal thought,” Daley continues, “the natural world is characterized as animate and interconnected with the human world and is one where human agency occurs in an environment that is equally shaped by nonhuman agency” (2016, p. 10). Wright herself sensed that animate connection, prior to writing the novel, while standing on the banks of the Gregory River in the Gulf. “What I saw,” she recalled, “was the mighty flow of an ancestral river . . . flowing with so much force I felt it would never stop, and it would keep on flowing, just as it had flowed by generations of my ancestors, . . . It was like an animal, very much alive, not destroyed, that was stronger than all of us” (2007b, p. 79). Consequently, the river, the serpent and the weather associated with it have fundamental roles in the book.

As well as being part of the land, the ancestral Serpent is also associated with storms, in particular “across the sub-tropical north of the continent,” observes anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt where, “the connection between snakes and storms is expressed more vigorously and consistently, if only because of the nature of the weather patterns in these regions” (1989, p. 124). Throughout this region, the Serpent in its various manifestations can be a law-giver with rain and flood-making powers, having associations with fertility, tidal movements, spring and water-hole replenishment and in North Queensland, “in his destructive involvement with cyclones, storms and floods, the Rainbow is actively linked with the taipan and other deadly or dangerous snakes” (1989, p. 124). As such, the Aboriginal mythical serpent is one of the great world mythical serpents of power, such as the Leviathan of the *Bible* that appears in Palmer’s *Cyclone* (1947), Hawthorne’s ouroboros, the Chinese celestial serpent-dragon, the Indian serpent Ananta that is coiled around the base of the World Axis, the Norse Midgardorm that is older than the gods and causes tides when it drinks and storms when it belches (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 846), and the South American plumed Serpent-Bird, Quetzalcoatl. “Serpent of the earth . . . snake that lies in the fire at the heart of the world,” Quetzalcoatl is so huge that “the rocks are his scales, trees grow between them,” according to D. H. Lawrence. Only his living keeps the earth alive, and “if

he died, we should all perish” (1987, p. 196). In fact, Wright uses the strength of the four elements – wind, water, earth and fire – that these mythical serpents characteristically control to not just invoke in *Carpentaria* a knowledge that is older than the current Australian nation, but also to resist European attempts to know, claim and control the Gulf area.

The novel seethes with an elemental fury of storms, lightning, dust, rain, fire and flood. The largest man-made site in the region, the Gurfurrit mine, is finally destroyed by a fire that rages “like a monster cut loose from another world. . . . roaring like a fiery serpent, looking over to us with wild eyes, pausing, looking around, as if deciding what to do next” (2007a, p. 410). It is a fire encouraged by a wind that, although “nobody had seen one for days, just as a matter of fact sprang up from the hills themselves . . . picked up all the trash . . . shot into the bowlers and momentarily, lit them up like candles” (p. 411). “The idea of the novel,” Wright says, “was to build a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side” (2007b, p. 85), where it would be as if “the land was telling a story about itself as much as the narrator is telling stories to the land” (p. 87), and the natural elements as well as the mythical elements are all part of that story. Wright saw this land, the land of *Carpentaria*, as “the land of the untouched: an Indigenous sovereignty of the imagination,” about which such an epic story could be told that might grow the land and through which the future might be envisioned, a story that reaches forward into the future as much as it reaches back through the layers of time and history (p. 94).

Into this land that is telling a story about itself appears a man who emerges from a cyclone onto the shore near the Gulf town of Desperance. This is a country of storms, so integral they “were like second nature to these people” (2007a, p. 86), and in one of these storms a “strong sea man, who was a wizard of many oceans,” loses his identity when his memory is taken from him during a once-in-a-century cyclone named Leda (p. 43). As a penalty for cursing the sea and Leda’s “black wind” as he pursued them to recover his memories, the spirits do not return his memory of his identity, only his memories of sailing and fishing (p. 166). Like the mythological Leda birthing Helen of Troy, Cyclone Leda births a man with no name and no memory, a *tabula rasa* on whom the people of Desperance eventually impose their own wishes and desires. This figure is significant; at the very moment his memory is stolen, miracles occur. Lightning rises *upward* from sacred locations under the sea to travel in a straight line south until it strikes a tree growing in the middle of Desperance to the sound of thunder, after which it rains so hard that the all the clocks stop at eleven minutes after midnight (p. 44). In effect, chronological time or durational time in a Western European sense stops for everyone in the town at the same instant, and it stops to mark this man’s transformation in a cyclone from human being into a spiritual

messenger. This is no longer the time of the calendar and the clock; the time of this story will develop and grow in its own time and occupy its own space.

Within this space, Wright evokes images of prophets as well as miracles. The people of Desperance are struck with a “sense of hopeless prognostication” (p. 45) that something is about to happen. The air is charged with static electricity; the people and their surroundings, including the water, are turned red by churned-up dust as if one of the Egyptian plagues prophesied by Moses has arrived. When the stranger with his long white hair and beard first emerges walking across the shallows of sand and mud flats towards the town, he seems to walk on the very water. Even as he approaches, heralded by children, the stranger appears as a different person to different people. While to some of the watching crowd he has the form of a seasoned fisherman from some distant shore, to others he resembles a “perfect human pearl” (p. 50). To yet another group, he is Jonah cast ashore, the archetypal unwilling prophet whose name became the sailor’s traditional name for a person who brought bad luck to a ship and its crew. Perceptions of the stranger divide along racial lines. To the white townspeople, he exemplifies the story of their origin. Like them, he is a stranger appearing from out of nowhere on some foreign shore, just as “their original forebear, a ghostly white man or woman, simply turned up one day” (p. 57). To the local Indigenous people, on the other hand, he is a magical being apparently affiliated with the Dreamtime world because the theft of his memory evidently appeases the cyclone that skirts the town instead of laying waste to it. “It was the beginning of the story of the day,” sums up Wright’s narrator, “the spirits of the seas and storms mixed their business, and sent Elias from out of oblivion into Desperance for a good reason. This was the story about Elias Smith which was later put alongside the Dreamtime by the keepers of the Law to explain what happened once upon a time” (p. 54). This man who is sent by the cyclone for a purpose is also significant to the white town population who, in more traditionally Christian imagery, places “the richness of prophecy squarely on this man’s shoulders” (p. 69). For a town that has always prayed for answers as to why the Lord’s hand seemed to move in ways that often defied their comprehension concerning the circumstances of drought, rot, termites and plagues, and why the fish always seemed to gather somewhere the fisherman were not, perhaps their prayers were answered and “God had given Elias to the town” (p. 76). Now that the town had their Everyman, anyone’s wishes might come true.

This man-with-no-name is christened with the name of prophet-as-saint by Captain Nicoli Finn. Another man who appeared in Desperance from nowhere, Finn has become a kind of guardian of the white population and the closest that they have to a prophet at that time, and he quickly proceeds to imbue the stranger with similar qualities. Accepted as “the only one among them who knew how to deal with the unexpected” (p. 74), Finn is appropriately the first to see the

stranger, claiming later that he looked “almost spiritual” as he approached, while in the background Finn could hear an organ playing music from Handel’s *Messiah* (p. 67). When questioned as to his identity, the stranger replies that he does not know who he is, identifying himself only as “I,” an echo of the Christ-like ‘I am’ (p. 75). The townspeople make the logical leap of faith and declare he is a saviour. Finn then literally passes on the prophet’s mantle by declaring the stranger’s name to be Elias Smith, transforming him into “the anointed one” (p. 76), the new guardian of Desperance. However, when Elias queries the validity of his new, unique, divine status, he questions the belief of the town in their own uniqueness, which they resist. The townsfolk promptly inform him that, “*You either are or you are not, and you are*” (p. 78), once again echoing the “I am.” Like the Christ-figure of the Bible, Elias has arrived with nothing, “not even his memory for a bit of trade,” in stark contrast to Norm and Will Phantom and Mozzie Fishman who are always carrying with them the wealth of their ancestral memory that stretches back into a past time of thousands of years. Elias is a man without a past, without tradition, without wealth. Eventually he features as part of another tradition when he becomes the town scapegoat. Having been judged guilty of a multiplicity of crimes he could not have committed, Elias is subsequently exiled back into the wilderness of the sea from where he came, there to be murdered by mine security personnel. Like a crucified Christ or apostle Peter, however, while his death might be the end of his physical existence, Elias’ spiritual influence remains in the lives of Norm and Will Phantom.

Here Wright is mixing her own ‘business,’ as she mixes the implications of Christian tradition with Indigenous lore. Elias is another version of the name Elijah, the name of the Biblical prophet who heard the “still, small voice of God” (1 Kings 19), and the parallels in *Carpentaria* are clear. God spoke to Elijah from out of the whirlwind, and he became a prophet of drought (1 Kings 17) as well as a prophet of rain (1 Kings 18) during the time of King Ahab and Jezebel, while he fought the will of the king to restore tradition. Likewise, Elias Smith emerges from out of the water into a landscape of drought in which the people are waiting for rain. Deprived of the knowledge of his real origin, Elias creates his own tradition with an origin story that he was blasted into the night sea from out of a bolt of lightning, entering the atmosphere so fast his memory was left behind. To the Aboriginal Pricklebush people, Elias is a “man of ancient ways” (p. 77) with whom they sit at night to count stars. They adopt him because they sense something spiritual about him, as does Norm Phantom who is aware that Elias knows the sacred place of the groper fish far out in the waters of the Gulf. He is sure that Elias can communicate with them because Norm has been out there with Elias when he has called them up from the deep to the

surface around their boat (p. 236). So at some time in the stories of both cultures in Desperance, Elias Smith becomes a prophetic symbol of hope.

Elias Smith is part of a tradition in Australian literature of wilderness prophets. In many ways, for example, he is reminiscent of Michael Random, the stranger found wandering outside the desert town in Randolph Stow's novel *Tourmaline*. Also at first unable to remember who he is, Random later claims to be a water diviner and thus to be able to save Tourmaline, a town that has not seen water for years. As the people of Desperance do with Elias Smith, the people of Tourmaline use Random as a blank slate on which to write their hopes and desires, so much so that perhaps he is inspired not by any God but "by Tourmaline," declares the character of Tom. "You thought you needed him. You convinced him he was what was wanted" (1983, p. 185). Like Desperance, Tourmaline is situated in an area where the local Aboriginal people believe that the creating spirit moved through the country, making rocks and hills, caves and waterholes as it passed by. When it became tired, it went down into the ground, creating a spring from which the water once rose to fill Lake Tourmaline, but the spring eventually ceased flowing and the lake dried up much as Wright's river deserted Desperance. While both these towns have become towns of drought and wind, yet they are not totally devoid of everything. "If there was an original God who had come along with all the white people, who created everything for them," proposes Wright's story-teller, "then this place was where he made his music." However, the visits of gods exact a price. As these tin-clad walls and roofs have aged, the sound of this divine wind has grown louder until it has driven the people half-mad (Wright, 2007a, p. 56). Tourmaline, too, is a town where "there is no stretch of land on earth more ancient than this," in which people are "tenants of shanties rented from the wind," from where the water has departed, to be only a memory (1983, p. 7). So, like the people of Desperance attaching their hope to Elias, the people of Tourmaline pin their hopes on the diviner, Michael Random. So wild is their optimism, in fact, "that there seemed to be a hazy feeling that the drought might break with the diviner's coming, and the millionaires go yachting on Lake Tourmaline" (p. 36). Although Random is found in the desert, like Elias he too seems to come from the sea. "Something about him always recalled to me the sea, the coast," recalls the narrator of *Tourmaline*, *The Law*; "there was so much hope in the look of him" (p. 37).

However, both these prophet-figures prove to be flawed as well as inspirational. Random, the water diviner, believes God has saved him from out of the desert and sent him to Tourmaline for a purpose. He has come from Hell, he claims, and God has spoken to him in the wilderness (p. 113). His arrival in Tourmaline does not have the overt spiritual overtones of Smith's arrival in Desperance, but it is also directed by accidental circumstance: in Random's case, a failed suicide attempt. Like Elias, his life is also saved by a town that gives him a purpose. "We made you," The

Law declares; “And not for your use. For ours” (p. 192). However, unlike Elias, Random’s eventual exile is because he actually committed a sin: he deceives the town that has taken him in and so he can no longer be trusted or believed. Random does not really care about them at all; he just cares about himself (p. 192). Like the protagonist of Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Wind*, who unable to bear the sound of the wind any longer finally surrenders and runs out into the storm, fleeing “across the prairies like a leaf blown in a gale, borne along by the force of the wind that was at last to have its way with her” (1979, p. 337), Random too finally runs into the wind and the desert when he is unable to find water. A flood of red dust borne on the wind then overwhelms Tourmaline, like the apocalyptic flood of water that removes Desperance from the face of the earth, sparing only The Law who knows that although terrors will ensue, there will be “wonders too, as in the past. Terrors and wonders, as always” (1983, p. 221). For both towns, there is hope.

Like many a prophet, Elias eventually discovers that he quickly becomes the subject of the people’s anger when misfortune occurs. Having been made caretaker of the town’s sacred and invisible defence net, “made of prayers and god-fearing devotion,” that is drawn over the town during the Wet season from November to march to protect it from cyclones (Wright, 2007a, p. 82), Elias is accused by the town of arson when a spate of mysterious fires occurs, culminating in the complete destruction of the Shire office building and the Queen’s portrait within it. The Biblical prophet Elijah called down fire from heaven as a sign of God’s power; Elias Smith, too, is accused of bringing down fire on Desperance and destroying the town records, ironically rendering amnesiac the town that had sheltered him as a man with no memory. His reply is to tell them the truth about how ridiculous they are. Consequently, the town exiles Elias into the wilderness of the sea from where he had come, after which he is never seen again. Norm Phantom loses “the only other person in the Gulf waters of Carpentaria whose skills matched his own” (p. 96) without doing anything to prevent it because he does not want to “go upsetting the white people” (p. 97). Instead, Norm decides to make the personal sacrifice of never fishing anymore; he becomes a marine taxidermist, restoring an appearance of life to the dead. In destroying his own legend, he sees himself acting to create a memorial to Elias that will force people to remember the time it happened and the reason for it.

It is Norm’s exiled son, Will, who with his mentor, father-in-law and spiritual leader Mozzie Fishman discovers Elias’ body mysteriously sitting in his small green boat, *Choice*, in a lagoon in the middle of the bush. Will recognizes him immediately, “accepting the gift of Elias’ spirit,” who had been waiting, he sees, to pass memories on to him that he had forgotten since the time of Elias’ departure. Mozzie, too, recognizes this re-discovery of Elias is “a message given to him from the spirit world” (149). Like the Biblical Elijah, who as a reward for his virtuous life is

taken up by God, translated, in a fiery chariot in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2) and so escapes death, Elias' body was also taken up in a whirlwind to the lagoon by a helicopter and, in a way, he doesn't die: his spirit continues to influence events. After keeping watch over Elias' body in a sacred cave, Will brings it to Norm's house and into his workshop in which live the spirits that help him create his painted fish, dead fish that sing with the voices of the crickets who live in them to call Norm into the room to find the body of his old friend.

Norm is convinced that Elias has returned because he wishes to be taken back to the sacred home of the groper fish in the Gulf, a deep place "where the congregations of the great groper journeying from the sky to the sea were gathered," where they would wait for him before travelling on to the sea of stars at the end of the season (p. 236). So, Norm and the body and spirit of Elias embark on a great spiritual journey out across the Gulf to a faraway place in a world that is "the realm of mischievous winds" and belongs "to the spirits of fishes, women and sea creatures" (p. 240), guided by the map Norm carries in his mind. Norm realizes he has to concentrate on that mental map to protect himself from the wiles of the wailing spirit sea-woman of death who follows them on their journey to claim Elias' body and spirit for her own. The groper is a sacred fish to the Aborigine people: to kill one brings its spirit into that fisherman's dreams and bad luck into their life. They were Norm's friends and fellow fishers, rounding up the reef fish for him as well as leading him up rivers to the prawn beds when he went fishing at night, so returning Elias to them is a significant recognition by Norm of Elias' spiritual status and of his relationship to the groper. As a seaman, Elias always navigated by the brightest star in the constellation, Pisces Austrinus, known as Fomalhaut, derived from the Arabic *fam al-hut* meaning 'mouth of the Southern fish' or 'mouth of the whale'. Norm knows this star as well: to him, it is the groper who swims from the sea into the sky every night and then back down again to his home beneath the water (p. 515). Thus he is returning Elias to his spiritual home, the sea from where he came, and to the home of Elias' spiritual animal: a reef crater abyss containing caves where both Europeans and Indigenous people agree the groper have lived for centuries (p. 250).

When Norm arrives there, guided to the place by a vast shoal of groper, the fish form a circle and wait. Sea birds gather around the boat "like angels high up in the skies" (p. 252) as he sends Elias' body into the depths where it is received into the "giant arms of water waiting at every depth to receive him" (p. 253). Yet, although he has arrived for a purpose connected with death and is aware of his loneliness after Elias has gone, "in this place, he felt alive again" (p. 252). Norm realizes this journey to restore Elias' spirit to its resting place has proved to him that "man can do almost anything if it was meant to be" (p. 252). If he is patient and reads the signs, he can go back and survive on the sea again. Elias' spirit becomes a catalyst for an epiphany that Norm

experiences through visions. He sees the “watery spider-web” formed by sea currents above which is the “forest of stars” that form the map to guide him home (p. 255). Maps are important to him for they are “his normal way of understanding the world” (p. 272). He has a vision of the groper rising from the sea to swim “through the ocean of air, to ascend into the sky world of the Milky Way” and perceives that Elias has gone with them back to his own country where he would “be like a star” (p. 258). For the rest of the novel, even though he cannot communicate with Elias again, Norm always feels that Elias is watching over him as a spiritual influence.

He wakes to find, like Patrick White’s Elizabeth Hunter in the eye of her cyclone, that he too is at the centre of a huge flock of gulls crowding his boat and spreading out across the sea. Beyond them on the horizon is the approaching cloud of the Wet season storm. Norm realizes that these birds are part of the great annual migration and that he, like them, is within “the natural cycle of things. A world without end” (p. 259). He dreams he is entering “a spiritual country forbidden to all men” and passes “place upon place where people once lived in the sea,” understanding that “what he saw he knew should never have been seen again” (p. 268). At that centre of life in the ocean, surrounded by gulls and fish during a spiritual ritual of death and homecoming, surviving temptations of suicide and a violent storm, Norm has an epiphany that after years of being dead inside, of being among dead fish instead of the living, he has now seen life in death; he is ready to re-establish himself with his family.

Isolated for so many years by pain, anger and loneliness, Norm Phantom now sees a path home on his mental map that will reunite and relocate him with his people and with the land. At the very end of the Old Testament, in the last verse of Malachi, Elijah is identified as the prophet who will herald “the great and terrible day of the Lord” who will “turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers”(4:5). Norm’s heart returns to his son, Will, and his grandson, Bala, because it is while on his return journey that he discovers Bala and his mother, Hope. The sea currents take Norm and his boat to the place where he finds his grandson, Bala, and with the help of the spirits of ancestors and of the bush country Norm rescues him from a cyclonic storm and flooding tidal surge. This, Norm finally acknowledges, “was the solace of Elias: how he used his death to help an ignorant old man find his grandson, to rekindle hope in his own joyless soul” (p. 307). However, Elias’ mantle of prophet is then passed on to Norm, for it is he who brings the ‘great and terrible day’ of the gods’ judgement upon Desperance by calling on his spiritual power to create, in one of the sacred ‘cyclone-making’ places, the great cyclone that destroys the town. “Cyclones don’t come from nowhere,” says the old Queen of the Pricklebush whom Will meets while sheltering from the cyclone that’s destroying Desperance,

because there is plenty of business going on when cyclones come onto the country out of the rooftop of the world, like what is going on outside now from the most powerful creation spirits, who come down out of the skies like a tempest when they start looking for Lawbreakers (pp. 478-9).

In *Carpentaria* country, cyclones have significant spiritual presence.

They also bear portent beyond their literal entity. Will sees not just “the tremendous fury of the winds gathering up the seas,” but also “clouds carrying the enormous bodies of spiritual beings belonging to other worlds. . . . the sound of the great spiritual ancestors roaring . . .”(p. 401). Will knows “a cyclone will always show you the way home” and that it is the giant cyclonic waterspouts of the ancient serpent that pluck the lost souls of the drowned from the floor of the sea and bring them to shore (p. 475). Will hears

the spirit waves being rolled in by the ancestral sea water creatures of the currents, and conspiring with the spirits of the sky and winds to crash into the land . . . The earth murmured, the underground serpent living in the underground river that was kilometres wide, responded with hostile growls. This was the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another” (p. 470).

He understands that it is the story of this great creation site that is his homeland, “where predetermined knowledge dwelled from a world full of memories, told, retold, thousand upon a thousand times from the voices of all times,” that is creating the tension in the air (p. 460). This new reality of destruction which he is trying to survive “has nothing to do with the order of man” (p. 491). This storm will change everything. When he seeks shelter in the roof space of the Desperance pub, Will soon realizes it is an “island abode of the Gods” (p. 490) and “a small castle for the recreation of spirits” (p. 491). Here, surrounded by the spirits of Aboriginal old people and of those fishermen lost at sea, the old Queen reminds Will that as a child he saw a creation spirit in the form of a cyclone follow a Lawbreaker up a river until it found him hiding in a town and killed him there. Cyclones have purpose, her words imply; cyclones are instruments of judgement. This cyclone, Will eventually realizes, is an apocalyptic storm that has been ‘sung.’ It has been sent to the town as judgement and “payback” by Norm, the man whom Mozzie Fishman declares knows all the sacred storm-making places and who can “fly through storms like an angel”(p. 486). Norm has performed the cyclone creation ritual in one of those sacred places as “payback” to the town and then directed it along the path of the sea currents towards Desperance (p. 487).

Yet this is not just a time of destruction but also of new possibilities. Will knows he is “being prepared for change,” and wonders “if indeed, he did carry a sense of knowing. . . . This was the root of ultimate trust he thought, the knowledge of intuition, of understanding the

vibrations of subtle movement in the environment” (pp. 460-61). In his mind he sees the waters of the sea “circulating in huge masses hundreds of kilometres wide and as many fathoms deep,” sensing “a mysterious change of great magnitude . . . taking place in the wetted atmosphere” (p. 460). He realizes

how history could be obliterated when the Gods moved the country. He saw history rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world into something more of their own making (p. 492).

While trapped by the cyclone in the roof of the pub, Will has an epiphany, a vision in which he sees Hope, the mother of his son Bala, still alive and this vision renews his belief that he will ultimately survive the storm in order to find her again. He first sees her apparently walking on the water, one of the connections Wright makes between Hope and Elias, who was also first seen appearing to walk on water. Wright’s constant puns on and allusions to hope throughout the novel leave little doubt that the selection of her name was deliberate. Norm and Bala discover Hope wandering along a beach with no memory of what happened to her, just as Elias emerged from out of the sea onto a beach in a state of amnesia. Norm believes miracles do not happen to anyone unless God has given them a miracle key. While he believes that Elias had such a key (p. 514), he is puzzled by Hope’s apparent miraculous survival from her fall from the sky to also emerge from the sea because he believes Hope’s descent from the Midnight clan’s weak, bad blood disqualifies her from being given a miracle key. So, he cannot at this point understand her place in these events. However, during his voyage with Hope and Bala in search of Will, Norm comes to understand that ultimately Hope will be the only one who can find Will and restore the next generation of the family. She cannot guide Norm to Will because she is afraid of the sea, yet only by travelling across the sea will Hope find him. This cannot be Norm’s journey; he cannot do it for her or even with her. It will have to be her journey during which Hope will have to face her own fears.

When Norm and Bala reach the original site of Desperance, the apocalyptic cyclonic flood has wiped the land clean of all traces of humanity: only the animals remain. There will be a need for hope as a new cycle begins, and so Norm is not surprised when Hope leaves him and Bala there and sets off in the boat to continue her search alone, a search on which she will be guided by her own map. Only then does Norm realise that he has “started to believe in her” (p. 517). The man who lost hope has finally found Hope. As Norm’s journey-cycle through sadness and revenge culminates in spiritual awakening and renewal sung by the voices of frogs awakened by waters of destruction, another cycle of hope begins for him, his people and their country.

“All times are important to us,” says Wright. “No time has ended and all worlds are possible” (2002, p. 20). In seeking to address such an epic story arc and period, Wright creates literature in her narratively complex *Carpentaria* that contributes to making a world at the same time as it enters the already existing world of Aboriginal Australia, a world that speaks in voices of myth and story. This is a world that Ronald and Catherine Berndt have described as a land “resonant with sound and presence – a land that is certainly not a passive or negative component” (1989, p. 426). It is a land that constitutes “a primary force,” that “speaks unequivocally, underlining what people imply is its concern for the affairs of human beings – even though it and what it contains act independently of them” (p. 426). It is, in the Berndt’s words, a “speaking land” with a mythology that holds up a mirror in which can be seen not only the actions of mythological beings but in which we can also identify ourselves (p. 427). This land with a voice is in sharp contrast to what W. E. H. Stanner termed “the great Australian silence,” the attitude of white Australians to the history of Aboriginal presence (1991, p. 27). Instead, *Carpentaria* voices an Aboriginal view of the world within the Western novel form, using the cyclic patterns inherent in the physical and spiritual elements of the place of the novel, the Gulf country, and this view challenges Western assumptions of the human sense of itself in the natural environment. These patterns are embodied in the cyclones with which Wright begins and ends the cycle of her story. In entering one world, Wright envisages another world made spiritually animate through interconnecting human and non-human forces and so, while embedded in a particular region and place, the novel challenges attitudes to inhabiting that place, to what it means to be in and part of that place. Her cyclones, while apocalyptic spiritual instruments, are also the voices and messengers of spirits. They have purpose, like all the natural elements of this country, and this purpose is to not only punish and destroy but also to transform; they destroy the old but they reveal the new. Cyclone Leda transforms Elias from person to prophet, but his transformation continues after the death of his physical body into that of a spirit guide and influence so powerful that it becomes part of the astronomy of the region. Will meets the spirits within the later cyclone, enabling his own spirit to be renewed after a suitable forty days and nights in the wilderness of the sea. Normal Phantom, a man with the (anything but normal) power to create cyclones, is guided by a cyclone to find Hope and Bala, a storm of such spiritual and physical power and dimensions that it ultimately alters the entire landscape. Thus the landscape of the old world is stripped and cleansed in order that a new life can be re-created in a renewed land under which the Serpent sleeps, where the frogs have assembled to sing fertility into a new world and a new time.

Chapter Seven

The Word Becomes the Cyclone: Revelations of the literary storm

“A culture’s most cherished places are not necessarily visible to the eye – spots on the land one can point to. They are made visible in drama – in narrative, song, and performance. It is precisely what is invisible in the land that makes what is merely empty space to one person a place to another. . . . The land gets inside us” (Barry Lopez, 1986, p. 278).

“I live in a land of great wind, and it defines me.” (Jan DeBlieu, 1998, p. 269).

The cyclone as trope of place

Tropical cyclones are an integral and historical part of tropical place, such as North Queensland. These catastrophic rotating storms are ineludible: although meteorologists can predict the cyclone’s path, its likely time of arrival and even its potential strength, as weather systems cyclones cannot be controlled, diverted, nor destroyed. They can only be escaped if one leaves the entire area, which in some cases may be difficult. People living on islands have limited escape possibilities, for example, or the weather system could be so large that distance could be an issue: the Cyclone Yasi system encompassed almost the entire Queensland coastline in 2011. If we wish to live meaningfully in the tropics, we need to discover how to co-exist with chaotic weather events such as cyclones, how to contextualize them within our life and how to imaginatively respond to them as the monsters that regularly invade our life. As Edmund Burke suggests, the very awe and terror engendered by such events as cyclones may prompt and heighten imaginative response to them, and this thesis has examined a range of imaginative responses to tropical cyclones in Queensland poetry and prose as a trope of a regional society’s literary search for a meaningful context for chaotic and catastrophic nature events. Such searches are significant because, “Disaster is, by definition, that which cannot be comprehended exactly,” according to Martin Voss (as cited in Coen, 2013, p. 3), and so studying the meaning of it as expressed in the writing of the disaster can enable societies, such as those in Queensland, to discover ways in which to comprehend, accept, and incorporate the chaos of nature catastrophes into their relationship with their place.

Literary tropes play significant roles in imaginary response for, “To connect the literature of a place with the actual place that gave rise to the literature,” argues Lawrence Buell, “can deepen not only one’s sense of the book itself but one’s sense of what it means to be in

communion with place” (Cranston & Zeller, 2007, p. 14). Such a relationship between person and place emerges from a continual process of exchange through the porous boundaries between society and environment. In much the same way as many of the physical elements in a wine-growing habitat, such as weather, geology, drainage, soil quality and composition, interact with chemical and mineral compounds during the growing process in a mysterious alchemy known as *terroir* to produce recognizably regional wine, so imagination interacts with the characteristics of a region in the development of pictorial art and literature that express the qualities and meaning of that region. “We are the cross-hatched winds of/Gungara the spiralling wind/from the Kimberleys, we are a poet/defiantly writing herself into creation,” Susan Hawthorne writes (2009, p. 78). Art and literature are both derived from and contribute to the physical and imagined, literal and literary place in which that society exists, described by geologist and *terroir* authority James E Wilson as the “additional dimension” of the habitat that is “beyond the measurable ecosystem.” It is, he proposes, “the spiritual aspect [of it] that recognizes the joys, the heartbreaks, the pride, the sweat, and the frustrations of its history” (2001, p. 141). Relationships between people and place can extend far beyond and much deeper than earth, rock and tree.

They can extend, in fact, to the weather of place for weather is part of *terroir*: it is “written into our landscape” (Harris, 2015, p. 9). Weather is mutually constituted with people into their intimate, interactive perception of place, and so while weather may seem to be mainly concerned with inanimate elements such as clouds, sun, rain, atmosphere and wind, it nonetheless affects human beliefs, actions and behaviour. As people are able to shape place, so weather is also able to shape place and thus, by implication, the people inhabiting it. We integrate meaning from weather as we draw the air and wind into our bodies as we breathe, developing a “wind mind,” as Susan Hawthorne termed it (2009, p. 78). As weather is integrated into self, our perception of weather can be intimately related to our perception of ourselves, as well as our place because, as Kate Campbell-Lloyd wrote after experiencing Cyclone Yasi, “The sound of cyclones live etched in the DNA of my body & soul” (Cardwell and District Historical Society, 2011, p. 85). So, in society’s quest to find meaning in place as it establishes relationship with place, it needs to be open to the revelations of weather. These revelations may be about the moral and spiritual dimensions of weather, such as those perceived by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, Patrick White in *The Eye of the Storm*, and Alexis Wright in *Carpentaria*, revelations of historical and cultural allegory such as those of Virginia Woolf in *Orlando* and Vance Palmer in *Cyclone*, or insight into personal doubts and fears and, such as occurs in Thea Astley’s *A Boat Load of Home Folk*. Perhaps we are all living on the edges of cyclones, as Astley suggested, where weather could isolate people if they do

not find strength in the connections of community that would help them survive potential catastrophe.

Cyclones that become damaging nature catastrophes on land have formed over the sea. Some do remain there as an entirely nautical weather system, never making landfall, such as the storm in Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon*, while very occasionally some are sufficiently large weather systems to affect inland areas. However, they predominantly affect coastal areas and have affected the North Queensland coast for millennia, becoming integral to that region's cultural identity. The Queensland coast is part of the Australian littoral, and coastal culture is a significant factor in the overall national identity of Australia. It is a place of encounter of land with sea, and person with nature, culture, history and, of course, the weather.

These encounters are even more significant in the present age because, having largely rejected the interior of the country demographically, Australians prefer to cluster along the coast. Consequently, as Philip Drew argues, the coast has now replaced the interior "as the chief spatial and symbolic focus in our culture" (1994 p. 3), becoming the buffer between the hostile wilderness of the sea and the hostile wilderness of the country's interior behind which Australians huddle, "surrounded by ocean and ambushed from behind by the desert," according to Tim Winton. He sees the situation as "a war of mystery on two fronts" (1993 p. 21), implying that Australians understand their relationship to the coast as little as they understand their relationship to the interior. The coast, after all, is neither stable nor predictable; it is a fluid place of interaction between land and sea and as such it is, Tim Winton proposes, "the supreme metaphor for change" (1993, p. 40). It is a place that threatens as much as it welcomes with such potential dangers as sharks, jellyfish, tidal rips, and tropical cyclones that materialize from the sea onto the coast, bringing chaos that emphasises to people the fragility of their human claim to the littoral and their ultimate inability to impose order on nature. Cyclones may well be part of regional *terroir*, but they are a reminder that elements of that *terroir* remain beyond the control of humanity. It is because these catastrophic weather events infuse the terror of disruption into people's perception of order in their relationship with place that people seek for a means by which they can contextualize the cyclone and its consequences to in some way restore that order or, at the very least, restore their relationship with their *terroir*.

The cyclone as trope of apocalypse

Cyclones as nature catastrophes are woven into the tapestry of place. They have happened in the past, they happen in the present and will continue to occur as part of place future. While we

may not ever fully explain the randomness and chaos of these events, studying their significance to the relationship of people with place as expressed in the language and literature of place may help us to contextualize nature catastrophes so that their significance in that relationship can be better understood. “Behind the symbol,” proposes Hoffman, “lies a logic that clarifies the event and gives it cause. Once ordered and given reason, a calamity can be given context, content, emotion, and meaning” (2002, p. 114). Because catastrophes such as cyclones are part of regional culture and impact on that culture, it is by means of stories that the nature catastrophe can be contextualized and given meaning within that relationship of person with place, thus constantly restoring people’s sense of *terroir* as events are given “context, content, emotion, and meaning” appropriate to the place. In this way, the trope of the catastrophe becomes more than a mere representation of the event. As people seek a revelation of the mystery of the catastrophe, the tropes and the stories that contain them become part of a cultural search for meaning, which is in turn part of a cultural response to the catastrophe.

In using the tropical cyclone in Queensland literature as a trope of apocalypse and of personal epiphany, writers have sought to explore, expand and reiterate their relationship with and response to a concept of place that includes catastrophe, yet which is still their *terroir*. As revelatory apocalypse, the cyclone can be a catalyst for recognition, review and renewal of relationship with place, some of which may be the result of an epiphany experienced within the cyclone or as a result of surviving one. Consequently the writer, as themselves or through their characters, re-examines their relationship with tropical place, suggesting to the reader in the process that they, too, might re-examine their own relationship. Although the modern usage of the term apocalypse tends to relate to the destructive event, the original Greek origins of the word have a broader meaning that includes the concept of revelation. In other words, the destruction caused by such an event may have a purpose: that of revealing the possibility of the new that could be recreated from the ruins of the old, for example, or the possibility of a second chance that may enable change. These possibilities can emerge as the extraneous personal, material or irrelevant aspects of life are stripped away.

Having described Paul Vesper, the protagonist and narrator of her novel *The Acolyte*, as “always touching on the edges of cyclones” (1985, 119), Astley later observed that many of her characters were doing that because “just being alive is like living on the edge.” In fact, she conceded, “Everybody’s living on a cyclonic edge.” Whereas her friend Patrick White took his characters into the eye of the storm, she explained, hers were “misguidedly trying to get away, out of the entire ambient of the cyclone and, of course, that is not possible, not for any human. The minute you are born you are put into this situation” (Willbanks, 2008, p. 30). Astley saw each of us

as living within their personal cyclone, and in her 1968 novel *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968), a group of people stranded on a South Pacific island by a cyclone discover that, indeed, they are unable to escape the cyclone within or the storm outside. Trapped by the external storm, they have no choice but to face their inner tempests, confronting secrets and personal torments. As the storm whirling on the outside strips away the layers of the island buildings, so it also strips away the layers of the group's characters to reveal the loneliness, shallowness, absurdity and unhappiness beneath, uncovering their flawed humanity. Some do not survive such an exposure, while others emerge changed by it.

The cyclone that maroons this group of cruise ship passengers is not just a literal storm trapping them there: it is also a storm of hypocrisy, vanity, stupidity and maliciousness generated by various members of the group. More importantly, though, it is an *apocalyptic* storm: one that is a revelation of personal truths and of truths about their interaction with each other. Except for Stevenson, who is prepared to accept what the cyclone reveals and act on it, most of Astley's passengers are "afraid to examine the gyrating circumference of mortality spinning around them because they are afraid of what such an apocalypse might reveal (Astley, 1965, p. 195). However, cyclones cannot stop them any more than one can change their direction. Some damage is subsequently inevitable. Impelled by the cyclone into prolonged and intimate contact with each other, unable to escape cyclones that rage internally as well as externally as the storm strips away their layers of ego, Astley's characters are overtaken by an apocalypse that not only exposes their underlying corruptible natures but also judges them. They are, indeed, living on the edges of cyclones.

For Susan Hawthorne, and other Queensland poets, the experience of the cyclone as apocalypse has opened them to the nature of being, of who they are in terms of where they are; in other words, where they are in relationship to place. Arguing that poetry has always been the song that we learn from the natural world imprinted into human culture, Hawthorne draws from her experience in *Cyclone Larry* to articulate the relationship between herself, humanity, and the environment: between person and place. As revealed in her cycle, *Earth's Breath*, her cyclone experience speaks of the successful relationship between person and place that can be developed from learning to incorporate into it those paradoxes of order and chaos, of destruction and creation, along with the possibilities of both personal and material re-creation that may enhance and prolong one's co-existence with the natural environment of their place, as they spiral together, "at the edge and at the centre of the/ universe in a massive creation of life" (2009, p. 78). Here, Hawthorne connotes the internal cyclone as well as the external, suggesting that we are all part of the same elemental universe in which such storms may impact intimately on our physical and personal

landscape, stripping away our outer personal layers as well as the roofs above us, revealing what has previously been hidden. Cyclone and person exist within the spiral helix of the universe, she contends, simultaneously at the centre and at the edge. For Hawthorne, the nature catastrophe changes lives on a personal level. We are all part of the same elemental universe, she argues in her work, existing as part of the same spiral helix.

As a weather event, the Queensland cyclone is part of the tropical place and the tropical person, imagined and literal; it is an integral part of the on-going, inevitable and uncontrollable cycle of birth and death, and of the change, renewal and recovery expressed by Pamela Galeano in “After Yasi,”

I was tired of the monsoon
Exhausted by the monsoon
Grey with the monsoon

Today I feel a change
A cool change
A dry change
Blue arches over me
New greens kiss my eyes
Yellow light floods my body
Flirting birdwings brush my skin
And my soul sings. (2011, p. 111)

Here Galeano imaginatively expresses her physical and mental post-cyclone recovery as a change in colours in her environment that elevates her mood. Here, imaginative literature acts as a medium through which, as a poet, Galeano expresses her recovery from disaster: the new light without enables her to see within. Thus, this study of cyclone literature reveals that the great spinning wheel of the cyclone represents more than just weather; it speaks of the cycle of life itself that literature seeks to illuminate.

The cyclone as cultural mythos and story

Through such illumination, the literary cyclone trope reaffirms people’s cohesive status within their relationship with cultural place. In repeating the stories of nature catastrophes, people reaffirm their relationships between the storm and themselves, between place and culture, integrating events into their lives and in the process reconstructing that part of their lives that

might have been destroyed. Stories enable people to place themselves within a universe that has shape and sense, to know their relationship to it and that their lives have meaning within it, even though that universe may contain uncontrollable elements. Stories are not only about place but *of* place; they not only form place but are formed *by* the place. Tropical cyclones that affect Queensland are formed by the place, that is they are a product of local meteorological conditions, but they also form the place in people's minds as they are read, told or heard. Whether expressed in poetry or prose, these stories become more than intersections of words and things, of words and cyclones: the words become the things, become the cyclones, and so speak of the *habitus* and the *terroir*. The stories are not just a matter of the relationship between reality and language; they are about the broader concept of the relationship between person and place.

The more often stories of cyclones are repeated, then, the more the cyclone becomes inculcated into personal and regional relationship with that weather event. As these stories are repeated from person to person, generation to generation, their events and characters and locations, even lessons they may be teaching, become integrated into the perception of the regional *terroir*. As stories develop as products of the region, they reinforce people's identification with the region. "Place has a more lasting identity than we have," proposes American short story writer and novelist Eudora Welty, "and we unswervingly tend to attach ourselves to identity" (1956, p. 251). In telling stories about cyclones and the impact of those cyclones on lives and landscape, those who write about Queensland cyclones are, in a way, forming the cyclone itself. That is, they are forming a perception of the cyclone and that perception is one that will give meaning to this otherwise chaotic, meaningless event. In offering this meaning, they are offering to people a way in which they can incorporate this event into their lives and so be able to retain their identity with their place. Having encountered uncontrollable weather events that have rendered order and meaning disordered and meaningless, writers of the cyclone are systematically reordering place and thereby allowing those who inhabit it to discover and retain meaning of their *terroir*.

In this way, stories of nature catastrophes such as cyclones are important because they enable people to relate to the weather event as part of the sense of place that is imagined in the mind, as well as externally seen and experienced. The literature, and the stories of which it consists, impact on the regional imaginary in a way that is specific and unique to the culture of the region. The stories enable us to understand the event, to incorporate chaos into our lives, and so people can integrate nature catastrophes into their sense of place: their *terroir*. Through the discourse of literature, both writer and reader are forming perceptions of cultural identity.

In fact, catastrophe stories have always been part of the cultural heritage of humankind for these very reasons. Daniel Defoe, for example, when writing of the great storm that struck Britain

in November, 1703, linked that storm with the one God had employed to dry up the Flood and the one with which God would render destruction on the wicked at Judgement Day (2005, pp. 17-18). As a constant historical, geographic and meteorological presence, wind and cyclonic storms have cultural associations with various geographic and climate areas of the planet and so have gathered various names, but whether cyclone, hurricane, typhoon, or tornado, whether a wind called *zonda*, *mistral* or *Mariah*, they are all elements of the air around us. They are an integral part of geographic and of cultural place, incorporated in literature since classical and Biblical times. Wind, air and storms have associations with the Christian God and with other gods in other cultures, and writers have used them in literature as instruments of divine judgement and retribution, or as instruments of revelation and renewal. The wind, Defoe considered, “is more expressive and adapted to his [God’s] Immediate Power,” and so it is “more frequently made use of as the Executioner of his Judgements in the World, and extraordinary Events are brought to pass by it” (2005, p. 17).

Literature “is conscious mythology,” Northrop Frye argues, and as society develops, “its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling” (1970, p. 295), and various mythic archetypes appear in cyclone stories as structural principles. In *Cyclone* (1947), for example, Vance Palmer uses the mythical, serpentine sea monster Leviathan as a trope for his cyclone, symbolizing the archetypal qualities of both serpent and weather event as well as those connotations of danger and fear of the unknown associated with it. The mythos of the serpent-monster becomes a structural principle of Palmer’s story-telling here: the shape of the natural event becomes that of the misshapen and mythic unnatural. “The serpent is one of the most important archetypes of the human soul,” writes the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in *Earth and Reveries of Repose* (2011b, p. 192), so significant that even ‘serpent’ as a word “listens to itself speaking” (2011b, p. 199). He argues that literary images of the serpent, such as allegories, go beyond mere descriptions of the serpent’s form and movement to “make the serpent such an eloquent being,” and consequently, “we never stop telling stories about serpents” (p. 199). Indeed, serpents pervade Palmer’s *Cyclone*, as both literal and allegorical threats to Fay Donolley’s family. Caught up in their own personal storms, the Donolleys have descended into a chaos within which Fay struggles to maintain order and protect her family. A physical serpent invades the Donolley’s own small Eden, into which Fay brings death when she orders its execution. However, the serpent continues to haunt her as an allegory for her mounting stress, culminating in her dream of the serpent-as-cyclone-monster, Leviathan, that could take her husband from her but over which she triumphs. This is the wounded and angry serpent from beneath her sea of trouble, her “waste of waters,” with the power to destroy everything if she but surrenders to it. It is the monster that is

always in wait to “turn the known world to an evil waste,” periodically resurrected by the power of apocalyptic dark forces (1947, p. 159). But in the end, Fay triumphs over the monster in a novel that is ultimately about resurrection and victory over dark forces, symbolized by Palmer’s deliberate timing of events for Easter Sunday. Palmer’s apocalyptic cyclone reveals a way ahead for his protagonists, and as the clouds clear from potential dark tragedy at the end of his novel, the aeroplane returning with Fay’s resurrected husband descends from the sky over the town like an angel bringing new life.

However, Palmer’s novel is not the only one of the literature group examined in this dissertation to associate the serpent with the cyclone. In Susan Hawthorne’s poetry cycle *Earth’s Breath*, Hawthorne acknowledges ancient symbolic links between the cyclone, the serpent and the circle. “The nature of a cyclone is to circle/to turn in on itself/ like the ouroboros swallowing its tail,” she contends (2009, p. x). The Egyptian and Greek symbol of the serpent consuming its tail, representing the infinite cosmic cycle of creation and destruction, also appears in Norse mythology as Jormungandr (or Midgardsormr), the great serpent that encircles the world. Hawthorne connects the ouroboros to other mythic serpents such as the winged serpent and the tempting serpent of the Garden of Eden that are also symbols of “the end in the beginning/ the crossing over of time” that subsume the nature of the relationship between herself and the cyclone into the eternal cycle of mankind, “the endless dance” (2009, p. x). Extending the scope of the cyclone trope, Hawthorne refers to the “great perturbation of wind and flood/ that recurs and recurs” (2009, p. xi) that is the ever-returning cyclone integral to this place. For Hawthorne the cyclone represents, like the ouroboros, the infinite cycle of beginning and end, of life from death, that is the very nature of apocalypse itself.

In the same sense of epic tradition, Alexis Wright begins *Carpentaria* (2007) with the creation story of the sacred ancestral serpent forming the regional place, a story of beginning and being evoking a region that, like the serpent, seems to live and breathe. It is country that is conscious and sentient, that not only generates action but also responds to it. Even the ebb and flow of the river’s tides are likened to the breathing of the great serpent beneath it. Giant snakes are an integral part of Australian Aboriginal mythology; tracks commemorating their journeys, sites and actions are among the many mythic paths sung across the continent. They were always associated with the region, playing a part in the shaping of topography and the people inhabiting it, and serpents are still there as a form of living serpent sovereignty connecting the physical and the metaphysical, the geology and the animate. Consequently, the river, the serpent and the weather associated with it have fundamental roles in her novel.

As well as being part of the land, the ancestral Serpent in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* is also associated with the storms of the tropical north of Queensland and, indeed, of the entire tropical region of Australia. Throughout this region, the ancestral Serpent in its various manifestations can be a law-giver with powers associated with cyclones, rain and flood-making, tidal movement and fertility. As such, the Aboriginal mythical serpent is one of the group of great world mythical serpents of power that include those just mentioned, along with the Indian serpent Ananta that is coiled around the base of the World Axis, the Chinese celestial serpent-dragon, and the South American plumed Serpent-Bird associated with rain and clouds. In *Carpentaria*, Wright uses the strength of the four elements, wind, water, earth and fire, that are often controlled by the mythical serpents to not just invoke a knowledge older than the current Australian nation, but to resist European attempts to know, claim and control the Gulf area. The largest man-made site in Wright's fictional region, the Gurfurrit mine, is finally destroyed by a fire that rages like a monster and roars like a fiery serpent. Wright wanted to "build a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side" (2007b, p. 85). She wanted to create story that reached into the future as much as it drew from history in which mythical archetypal elements as well as natural elements are all part of that story. Wright imagines new ways for readers to develop an appreciation of the deeply spiritual place and the weather that is an integral part of that place. In her imagined place there is 'plenty of business' concerning cyclones that bring prophets and then apocalypse. The landscape is destroyed but also renewed. Stories bring hope.

The other great archetype that threads through these stories to ground them in the culture of place is the shape of the cyclone: the circle and the spiral. In Patrick White's novel, *The Eye of the Storm* (1977), the circle represents for White, on the one hand, the cyclic spiritual journey through suffering towards being accepted into the presence of God. The symbolic circular pattern, at the centre of which is a hidden spiritual presence, overlays much of White's work, and as a type of that pattern White favoured the Eastern mandala: the circle or circles within the square surrounding a spiritual centre that symbolise the totality of the self and the unity of the individual with the cosmos and through which one must discover the right path to that spiritual centre in order to achieve union with it. However, the mandala is not the only cultural representation of the cycle of life and the search for meaning; a number of other cultures express their journey towards achieving a spiritual bond with their place as circular or concentric circle pattern designs. Poets such as W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot also wrote about the search for balance and harmony in terms of circular patterns at the centre of which one would find meaning. When the wealthy, ego-centric Elizabeth Hunter of White's novel crawls out from the cellar on Brumby Island where she has sought shelter from a cyclone, she finds herself in the stillness of the cyclone's eye, surrounded by

birds. Her experience there, though brief, is one of grace and peace but also one of an immense symbolic significance, which she seeks to understand during the remainder of her life. The eye becomes her core of reality, her true reason for existence at the very centre of her outer layers of appearance. It is Hunter's meaning in a world that increasingly becomes meaningless to her.

At the centre of White's spiral pattern is the in-dwelling god: the 'I' that must answer ultimately to the One that lies beyond the material world" (1977, p. 219). For White, that 'One' is a God that he leaves hidden because he is primarily interested in the human struggle rather than in spiritual exegesis. Until Elizabeth Hunter emerges into the eye of the cyclone, she has been too occupied with her material world to notice the spiritual one but suddenly, here in this still point of the circling world, she experiences an epiphany that reveals the hidden God to her and how the 'I' within her might answer to Him. There she has a dialogue with that spiritual presence during which she realises her life has a deeper, more spiritual meaning than that which she had previously believed. Her ultimate reward for accepting this revelation will be the union at the time of her death of her in-dwelling 'I' with the hidden God. Although the world of being, represented by her children and all their trivial materialism, threatens to intrude on her search and cause her to deviate from her journey, she ultimately arrives at the end of her life prepared for her transformation at the moment of her death that will eliminate her corporeal matter, releasing her in-dwelling god, her "I", to achieve union with the universal Eye: the hidden God. Accepted into an apocalyptic meteorological inner circle, the eye of a cyclone, where she has an epiphany that reveals to her the potential relationship she could have with her spiritual place, Hunter is ultimately able to accept a death at the time of which she transcends into that place and becomes one with it. Not until the end of her life does she ultimately discover her truth and is granted dispensation by the watchful universe as she experiences, at the moment of her death, a final revelation of that beach on which she stood in the eye of the cyclone. In this work, White has used the patterns of circle and mandala, here associated with the cyclone and the cyclone's eye, to express the potential and development of relationship between person and spiritual place.

The cyclone as trope of people and spiritual place

There is an underlying bond between story, person and place, a relationship succinctly summed up by Welty as, "You and me, here." Fiction, she argues, "is all bound up in the local" and it "depends for its life on place. Location is the cross-roads of circumstance, the proving ground of 'What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?'" (1956, p. 251). In writing about cyclonic storms, tropical writers are putting into words their *terroir* as well as their terror, forming

and re-affirming a sense of terra that includes the spiritual and the imaginative as well as the physical, finding the sublime within the storm.

So close is our spiritual relationship to place, in fact, that the ancient Romans believed each place had its own spirit, the *genius loci*, which gave identity to that place through presence and action. Later writers such as Shakespeare made much of that tradition. Like Ariel and Puck, the cyclone as spirit of North Queensland place manipulates and impacts on place and, in doing so, imbues it with identity. The cyclone experience can be a deeply spiritual one, as Patrick White's Elizabeth Hunter discovers. Like her, people seek to engage with, and understand, their relationship with place by contextualizing the landscape as it is to them. It is primarily the individual, after all, who is the point from which landscape is perceived and experienced and so becomes our ego-centred place. Thus sense of place is deeply personal, truly understood only when one senses in the mind the spirit within place, of place. As Seamus Heaney argues,

There are two ways in which place is known and cherished, two ways which may be complementary but which are just as likely to be antipathetic. One is lived, illiterate and unconscious, the other learned, literate and conscious. In the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension (1964, p. 131).

This tension, he goes on, becomes resolved in the imagination, in what he calls the 'country of the mind.' It is this "feeling, assenting, equable marriage between the geographical country and the country of the mind," he writes, "that constitutes the sense of place in its richest possible manifestations . . . or, better still, our sensing of place" (1964, p. 132). In reading the stories of place, we experience that place in our imagination, resolving in our country of the mind the tension between what we unconsciously understand of place and that which we consciously learn and appreciate through literate sensibility.

As one of the major elements within the literary sensibility of Queensland place, the cyclone is part of the North Queensland 'country of the mind', part of a sensing of the relationship between person and place. Heaney wrote of the English Lake District that it "was not inanimate geography but active nature, humanized and humanizing" (1964, p. 145); neither is the North Queensland landscape inanimate geography but likewise a *terroir* of active nature, "humanized and humanizing." As the cyclone shapes the local stories, so it shapes that regional 'country of the mind'. "The cyclone of our mind/it can feel/just as real," Kim Callander wrote after Cyclone Yasi (2011, p. 123). The cyclone inside us can become part of our *terroir*. As Barbara Bender observes in her introduction to *Contested Landscapes*, people's sense of place "extends out from the locale and from the present encounter and is contingent upon a larger temporal and spatial field of

relationships. . . . The familiar topography gives way to the unfamiliar, one landscape nests within another like Chinese boxes - except that the boxes are permeable" (2001, p. 6). Even though a place might be understood as 'our' place, an individually understood place, each person exists within a community as part of a broader place: our place is also their place, and our experience can also be their experience. To understand the place as it is to the individual, we need to understand the context of that place within the broader communal landscape, of how the individual place is also part of those larger temporal and spatial fields.

For people to understand and engage with their worlds, they need to contextualise them within the landscape of those larger worlds. The individual is the point from which the communal landscape is perceived and experienced as our landscape, and so the landscape is ego-centred, contextualised in terms of history, age, class, gender, society, education and economy. Such personal landscapes are not only literal: they can exist temporally, engaging with the past or future, or into space or under the earth and water, for example. They exist in the mythological sense of Australian Aboriginal peoples, who live within their landscape grid of creation myths and songlines that locates them simultaneously within literal and spiritual topographies. "Landscape is never inert," Bender (1995) writes; "People engage with it, re-work it, appropriate and contest it. It is part of the way in which identities are created and disputed" (p. 3). As people engage, they position themselves within their landscape in order to render it meaningful. For example, cyclones and geographic features alike are endowed with names, in order to incorporate them into the landscape of the familiar and to impose order on elements of the landscape that are chaotic and random, enabling people to form patterns of experience.

People endow cyclonic storms with names for similar reasons, and this brings us back to Mr. Wragge. Cyclones are products of weather, of air that is invisible. That which is visible are the effects of the cyclone, but they have been produced by something that is neither controllable nor avoidable within that area. Cyclones are random, chaotic events; they exist because of certain arbitrary combinations of sea temperature and air circulation but otherwise have no meaning for their existence. There is no reason for the physical destruction in terms of personal fault. Endowing the weather event with a name enables people to form patterns of experience that helps them make sense of the phenomenon. It is in the context of such patterns that people constantly search for explanations, whether they relate to gods or fate, to cope with and survive violent, elemental and unexplainable natural events, such as cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, or floods that cause extreme changes to our otherwise ordered, rational world. While for some there must be a reason, for others there never will be one, precisely because the cyclone is a force of untamed, primordial nature, a meteorological pulse that contradicts linear time and order. Cyclones typically demonstrate that

natural elements should be accepted as part of daily life, for the spiral of the cyclonic storm is the universal spiral seen in a galaxy, a DNA helix and the whorl of a sea-shell. As the cyclone is experienced across literary and literal geographical landscapes, a regional consciousness is engendered by this common circulation of elements, and in this way the cyclone becomes a key constituent of a socio-ecological relation that roots North Queenslanders to their land and to the tropical region. Thus, the cyclone can be a trope of deeper, universal meanings, as it is in Alexis Wright's 2007 novel, *Carpentaria*.

The two cyclones that bracket Wright's work are part of an "imagined, hopeful and alternative landscape of literature" (Archer-Lean, Carson & Hawkes, 2013, p. 30) within which Wright shapes the possibility of a new future for that landscape's inhabitants, while she imagines new ways for readers to develop an appreciation of this deeply spiritual place. "The ancestral serpent," she begins,

a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. . . . It came down, those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. . . . They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin (2007a, pp. 1-2).

Yet this has become a place of apparent hopelessness for a people whose last hope is stories. "Anyone can find hope in the stories," the elders remember, "the big stories and the little ones in between" (2007a, p. 12). After the apocalypse of the second cyclone, there is hope of a new landscape, of a promise symbolised by earlier, seemingly miraculous events: thousands of seagulls hovering in the sky before a storm, atmospheric conditions that cause all the clocks in the town of Desperance to stop, and the Messianic vision of Elias Smith seeming to walk across water towards the townspeople after the cyclone.

In Wright's novel, Elias Smith is a tabula rasa, a blank slate on whom people will write their stories of hope, of loss and of storms to come. As the old Aboriginal people say, "Cyclones don't come from nowhere, because there is plenty of business going on when cyclones come onto the country out of the rooftop of the world" (2007a, p. 479), and in this landscape there is indeed 'plenty of business' concerning cyclones. As the final cyclonic flood surge obliterates the town of Desperance, Will Phantom realizes

how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world into something more of their own making (p. 492).

As a true instrument of apocalypse, Wright's final cyclone destroys the landscape but also rebuilds and renews it. At the novel's end, there is "so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh" (p. 519), as Will and his son walk into their new home. In Wright's story, the environment is given sentience through an animal embodiment both literal and spiritual that permeates everything, including human life and, in this way, *Carpentaria* imagines new ways of understanding relationship with the physical, natural landscape. This cyclone is a spiritual as well as a physical experience that brings together the conscious with the unconscious in the landscape of the mind.

The cyclone as universal trope

The metaphors and aesthetics of tropical cyclones permeate Queensland literature. The cyclonic storm in Queensland literature reverberates with contexts of theme and setting, of plot and place, of tropes and tropics that encompass the complicated and symbiotic relations between society, nature, landscape, place and space. The cyclonic storm is a literary trope of both personal and collective awareness, of revelation within the stillness and spirituality of the cyclone's eye that enables the individual to emerge from the experience transformed. To transcend the tropical cyclone experience, one needs to be open to the epiphany of the revelation as these violent storms strip away the historic human over-growth, leaving room to re-build and for new life to grow. Cyclones can in this way narrate resilience in the face of natural disaster and allegorize the power of cultural consciousness to strengthen and unify communities and regions. Individuals and communities who have been alienated, weakened, or seemingly destroyed can be drawn closer by cyclonic events, discovering in the aftermath that which had previously been hidden, discovering hope and opportunity where previously were despond and despair. Such events and the stories of them can challenge previous human experience, thereby providing opportunity to move forward and rebuild, opportunity for the emergence of the new.

While this research has been concerned with the implications of cyclonic events in Queensland, it does recognize that cyclonic storms occur in many regions, and so the search for the meaning of them is a search in which many are engaged around the globe. As she latches the window shutters, pulls the curtains, and lights candles in the face of an oncoming storm, American poet Adrienne Rich (1951) muses in "Storm Warnings" that, "These are the things we have learned to do/Who live in troubled regions" (p. 1). Such stories of catastrophe within these regions and their symbols and metaphors, writes anthropologist Susanna Hoffman (2002), "reflect the mental

processes of a collective people and the fruits of both creative impulse and sense-making reasoning” (p. 113).

As tropical regions continue to develop, so will the challenges of living within them. Some challenges, like the weather, may not be issues humankind can solve, but rather will be challenges with which we must learn to live, and one of the ways in which we can learn is through a shared literary experience. In living within the community of the tropical region, we not only accept the cyclonic storm as an integral part of life, but we should also be prepared to heed the epiphanies and revelations of cyclones as expressed in the literature of the tropical region. We can better understand and enable our developing tropical world by embracing new worlds revealed by the literary storm, as we broaden our perception through revelations about the relationship between the individual, society, and the tropical biosphere, between weather, person, and place.

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Chapter Two: "Big wind, he waiting there:" Vance Palmer's cyclones of apocalypse and their power of revelation

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Chapter Three: “Touching the edges of cyclones:” Thea Astley’s cyclones of revelation

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Chapter Four: Threading The Eye of the Cyclone: Elizabeth Hunter's epiphany in Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm*

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Appendix A

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Appendix B

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